

Karla

SABER

BOOK

VERN WADE

Karla, the
reigning queen
of Madame
Fronzeh's,
changed Heflin's
low opinion
of bordello girls
on that festive
night in
New Orleans



...When Jack entered Karla's room

"Why are you staring so at me now?" she asked.

"Because of your exotic beauty," I said, "and for for one more reason, you haven't so quickly skinned off your clothes as though you're in such a hurry."

"Don't give me so much credit for that," she warned. "I usually do that, as I can't always make such outstanding selections."

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"That's true, in many cases, especially when a girl out-lives her glory in one house, and strives to hold her clientele, so she won't have to move to a cheaper house. Many girls have come and gone, Jack, since I've been here."

"I can only imagine your going to a more expensive house," I told her honestly, loving the way she said my name." How much time have I with you?"

"I had no idea you hadn't been told," she said, slightly frowning, as though she were sorry for some mistake. "When I make a selection, or rather when I'm chosen, it's for as many hours as the night and forenoon are long."

"Bless your rules, or the rules of the house!" I said. "So few hours are a small amount of time for any man to spend with you."

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CHAPTER ONE

When business took me to New Orleans, I considered it a break that my trip happened to coincide with Mardi Gras, that holiday interlude when pleasure reigns supreme in the old city where pleasure was never hard to find in abundance and in exotic form. This time I should have felt extra lucky because my customer had bought all the goods I had to sell, at a price which delighted him and made me a sizable profit. He was in a mood to celebrate and wanted me to be his guest. The atmosphere was festive. I was free for the moment from business cares. I should have felt good about it.

I would have, if my trip hadn't taken me first to New York for a hectic, frustrating week. I was still seething from an encounter there with a fashion model, a 200-carat gold-digger named Paula. She'd turned out to be the kind of phoney that makes a guy like me boil.

I'd always played it straight with my women. As a bachelor, at thirty, with every intention of retaining that status, I'd never made any promises I wasn't prepared to keep. That way, nobody got hurt, and I'd never had any complaints from a girl who was out for mutual laughs and thrills, and willing to be as honest about it as I was. This model, though, Paula, had proved to be another kind. I'd come away from my tangle with her as hot as a firecracker, and it showed.

At least Johnson, my customer, seemed to notice it.

"Come on, Heflin," he said, that afternoon when we had wound up our deal, "you look ready for some wine, women and song."

"I'll take you up on the wine, anyway," I said. "You lead the way."

"Costumes, first," he insisted. The whole town was in costume. We had to be, too.

We went to his home where with some amusement I

watched this wealthy business man transform himself into a carnival figure in the pale satins and lace of a French dandy.

"Don't laugh," he said, adjusting a curled, powdered wig over his balding head. "A costume does a lot for your spirits—and what makes you think you'll look so good in yours?"

He brought out from his closet an armload of fancy outfits designed to fit any size wearer, and told me to take my choice.

I was tempted by a baggy clown suit, but the thought of putting on clown's make-up discouraged me. I took, instead, a long enveloping black cloak I could don over my street clothes and complete with a mask.

"I knew you'd pick that one," said my host, handing me a black domino to wear over my eyes and a high silk hat.

He was right about costumes. Dressed up like Chandu the Magician, I did feel my spirits rise, and I went out with him into the crowded, brilliantly lit streets with a somewhat more benevolent attitude toward women in general—but with undiminished hatred for a certain New York bitch named Paula whom I was determined to forget.

We pushed our way into a noisy cabaret where Johnson was recognized, despite his wig and satin suit, by an obliging bartender who found a couple of stools for us at the bar. After a couple of bourbon highballs I was beginning to get in the mood. I looked around at the colorful crowd, speculating on how much the choice of costume was prompted, in individual cases, by the temperament of the wearer.

One couple at a corner table particularly interested me. Was the man revealing his own idea about himself in donning a flashy red devil's costume, complete with horns, pointed tail, and flowing scarlet cape? How about the girl with him, a gorgeous creature, just discernibly mulatto in her coffee-and-cream complexion...

Was she expressing her personal feeling about herself in dressing like a harem slave girl, her exquisite body alluringly displayed in filmy drapes, heavy gold rings in her ears and bangles weighting down her shapely arms?

"The devil and the slave," I mused aloud, calling Johnson's attention to the couple. "They act their part, too. Are they just living up to their costumes, do you think? Or did they pick costumes that happened to suit their natural personalities?"

Johnson watched the girl's humble, timid efforts to attract the notice of her arrogant companion, who coldly ignored her.

"Right the second time, I'd say," he replied. "She's Sarola Damon, a call girl at Madame Fronzeh's, a high-class house I was planning to take you to later this evening. He's her pimp—and from what I've heard, he's pretty much what his costume indicates. He makes her life miserable."

I looked at the red devil with disgust. If there was any one breed of humans I loathed more than a phoney like Paula, it was a pimp like this character. In fact, to me a pimp was the lowest species of mankind, next to him a whore.

While I was looking at him, the devil rose from the table and with one deliberate unhurried gesture dashed his drink into the slave girl's face.

She didn't even flinch, only gazed up at him with pain in her dark eyes as he turned on his heel and left her, lean and tall in his scarlet tights, his cocky horned head high over most of the crowd.

I didn't realize I was half off my stool till Johnson's hand on my arm detained me.

"Don't interfere," Johnson said.

I shrugged and sat down again.

"Somebody ought to smash that joker's face in," I muttered.

"That wouldn't make Sarola any happier," Johnson

said.

And I had to admit he was doubtlessly right. Her quiet reaction to the incident indicated that it had happened before, probably many times. Dabbing her lovely face dry with her transparent veil, she calmly glanced at the check and put a couple of bills down on the table to pay it, before rising to leave.

"Real beauty, isn't she?" Johnson commented, gazing appreciatively at her voluptuous figure, nearly naked beneath her sheer costume, as the crowd parted to let her through to the door. "And there's more like her at Madame Fronzeh's. Shall we go?"

At my dubious expression he laughed and said,

"Not *just* like her. They don't all keep brutes like that devil, if that's what's bothering you."

That was only part of what was bothering me. I couldn't take a girl who degraded herself with scum like that pimp, and I wasn't sure that I could take any one of Madame Fronzeh's harlots. Somehow, while I was in constant search for conquests, I'd never set my sights on a prostitute, and to have one just for the sake of having her once, I could see no future in it. But because Johnson was such a profitable and important client, I felt I could go along and at least pretend to be sport enough to take one of the whores at Madame Fronzeh's.

CHAPTER TWO

We were both covered with confetti and serpentine by the time we arrived at the impressive house with wrought-iron balconies and subdued lights gleaming from the windows. Johnson made his way up the stone steps and rang the bell. I followed him in when the Negro maid opened the door, greeted him warmly, and invited us both to wait in a sumptuously decorated music room.

A dignified woman entered and greeted Johnson. He introduced her to me as Madame Fronzeh. She smiled and welcomed me graciously to her "supper club"—an elegant term, I thought, for a brothel.

But Johnson assured me the food was superb, and he ate there occasionally even when he had no desire for female companionship.

It was only after we had eaten lightly in the dining room and returned to the music room for our brandies, that the girls came in. They did not display themselves in an obvious way. A delicate redhead played softly on the grand piano. Two flashing brunettes, apparently sisters, talked to each other in front of the fireplace.

Johnson seemed to know one of the sisters well, if not both. He indicated his choice by strolling over and getting into the conversation, after which one of the brunettes walked away quite casually and began talking to Madame.

Meanwhile, from subdued sounds, I was aware that other guests were arriving and being shown by the maid to adjoining rooms—the library, or one of the sitting rooms I had observed when entering the house. Apparently everything was arranged to preserve the idea of a club, with casualness and privacy of utmost importance.

Two more girls entered the music room in animated conversation. One was extremely lady-like in appearance, her brown hair coiled in braids on top of her head, her dress modest. The other girl was brilliantly blonde, with regular features and a bright red mouth.

I supposed I ought to make my selection, but before I could decide, the door opened again—and I found myself staring, dumbfounded, at whom I thought was Paula!

I couldn't believe it. Anger and a violent rekindling of unfulfilled passion surged through me. How could the so-desirable and so-untouchable Paula be working here?

I moved toward her, not knowing whether to laugh or slap her lying face. After leading me on for an entire frenzied week in New York, and then convincing me she was a virgin, as pure and twice as cold as the driven snow, who couldn't be had until a hunk of diamonds was placed on her third finger, left hand, to make it legal—how could she turn up here, a common whore, for hire by the night in a New Orleans brothel?

But she was staring right back at me without a flicker of recognition in her eyes, which were hazel with golden flecks. Despising her as I did, I was still stirred by her beauty. Her skin was luminously pale, yet with a golden glow that seemed to blend into her honey-colored hair. Her gown, which almost matched her hair, clung to her body in chiffon folds, and was cut so low at the neck as to reveal the cleft between her breasts. In that small valley there were three moles forming a perfect triangle...

What I might have said to her at that moment, in a fever of rage and desire, I never knew—for which I was forever thankful. Because before I could speak, I was stopped by a sudden double-take. Those moles... I could not recall having noticed any moles above Paula's breasts—and she had dressed herself, every time I had taken her out, in New York, as enticingly as she dared without going stark naked. Her bosom had been exposed to view often enough, but there had never been a triangle of moles there!

This wasn't Paula!

At the instant the realization hit me, the girl's warm smile confirmed it. This beautiful little whore was almost a mirror-image of Paula, but I would have bet any amount that Paula had never in her entire mercenary scheming life smiled like that—radiant, spontaneous, unaffected.

"You've been staring at me long enough to know everything about me but my name," she said, smiling, and her voice was low and soft. "I'm Karla."

"Karla," I repeated, still a little stunned and baffled. Then I managed to collect my senses. "I'm Jack," I told her, smiling back at her. "You can't blame me for staring," I added, deciding on impulse to say nothing about first mistaking her for a golddigger named Paula. For this girl, Karla, was as available as Paula had been unattainable, and for the moment I wanted her. Not to merely pretend to take her, like I'd previously planned, but to actually depart to some secluded room of the brothel and lay with it, take all she had to offer, and give all I could in return.

I became aware that we were alone, though I had not noticed the others leaving. There was a discreet knock at the door, and Karla said,

"Come with me!"

Apparently a new party of men waited to be shown into the music room. From her command, I gathered that she was as anxious for me as I'd become for her.

I followed her out a side door, through a passageway, and upstairs to her room. It was clearly her own room, decorated to her taste. There were pictures on the dressing-table, one a photograph of a young girl in the white mortar-board and gown of a girl's school graduate—Karla herself, I thought. Another photograph pictured a man and woman, well dressed and attractive, and not very far into their thirties.

"My parents," she told me, after noticing that I stared lengthily. "They're dead," she added, not depressingly but just as information, and perhaps to explain their youth in the picture.

I turned to face her but she wasn't naked. Almost the identical thing had happened to me once before, except that I had wanted to, and had agreed to, enter a brothel. I'd gone into the room with the harlot, and I had noticed a photograph. She'd told me who it was, and when I'd turned to her, she was naked, ready to get down to business.

"Why are you staring so at me now?" she asked.

"Because of your exotic beauty," I said, "and for one more reason, you haven't so quickly skinned off your clothes as though you're in such a hurry."

"Don't give me so much credit for that," she warned. "I usually do that, as I can't always make such outstanding selections."

"I once heard that girls in these places almost always tease a man into believing that he is a special one who comes so seldom."

"That's true, in many cases, especially when a girl outlives her glory in one house, and strives to hold her clientele, so she won't have to move to a cheaper house. Many girls have come and gone, Jack, since I have been here."

"I can only imagine your going to a more expensive house," I told her honestly, loving the way she said my name. "How much time have I with you?"

"I had no idea you hadn't been told," she said, slightly frowning, as though she were sorry for some mistake. "When I make a selection, or rather when I'm chosen, it's for as many hours as the night and forenoon are long."

"Bless your rules, or the rules of the house!" I said. "So few hours are a small amount of time for any man to spend with you."

"Now you might be flattering me," she said, moving toward me. "If I were dishonest enough to hide my past and present, I might wish that I'd met you somewhere else."

"Karla!"

She moved gracefully into my arms and I held her, fearfully alarmed she'd suddenly vanish from my embrace. As our clothed bodies touched, I felt the velvet softness of her flesh, and I couldn't bring myself to actually realize that this creature was in a brothel and Johnson had bought her for me. Our lips met, and very gradually her mouth opened and the tip of her tongue found mine, sending blazes of passion through me. I

looked once and her eyes were closed but her head moved from side to side, like her life depended upon the impression of our first kiss.

I caught her hair and tore my lips from hers. I held her head back, bit once at her cheek, kissed each eye in turn, then brought her lips again to mine. My tongue raced between her lips and her teeth, up and down, and I was certain that I wanted to eat every ounce of her. First she began trembling acutely, then she tore from my embrace, disengaging our mouths.

"Oh, Jack! What is this? It can't be like this, Jack!"

"Karla, it has to be this way now. It's what you do to me, Karla! I taste you. Like a starved man, dying for food, I'm that way about you!"

"You have me, Jack," she said, more calm now. "I'm bought. I'm yours for this night. But what is it that makes me this way for you? Why must I realize now that tomorrow you will go, and I'll wonder night and day where you are, wish you were back?"

"We mustn't think like that now, Karla!" I said. "It's just for the moment. After we've been, after we know, when morning comes, the feeling will be different."

"Yes, Jack," and her voice was soft and submissive. "Tomorrow will be different. But when you're gone, I'll still wonder day and night where you are, and if you'll ever come back!"

She broke gently away from me. I saw some pout on her lips. I watched her as she took her ear ornaments off and placed them on her dresser. She sat on her bed, raised her gown, and removed her stockings. As she began slipping off her gown it was rendering her entirely naked. Then she lay supine upon her bed, while I, suffering a heavy heart, stood stock still, fully clothed in the costume I'd worn there.

"You must undress and let me serve my purpose, Jack," she told me softly, unpoutingly now. "Forgive me for losing my head."

I went to her, knelt beside the bed and touched her arm, while her whole exquisite body lay at my disposal. Somehow her arm was just as much as her whole self then, and just to touch it thrilled me.

"Put me in my place, Jack!" she begged. "Don't let me think beyond what I'm here for!"

I rose. I was angry at myself. I began undressing, nearly tearing the clothes from my body. Everything finally lay in a heap on the floor, and I gazed down at Karla. She was art. Like a beautiful portrait taken from the wall and placed upon a bed. It seemed that if I violated her, it would be like scratching and clawing at the portrait, mutilating it, rendering it scrap for a junk pile.

She lifted her arms until they were out-stretched, an invitation for me to go to her. I went into them, trembling with desire and our bodies mingled fastly while we again kissed. She broke from me, this time urging me to lie prone, and she raised herself above me, letting a breast barely touch its nipple against my chest.

"It's around the world now, Jack," she said, gazing into my eyes meaningfully. "Just lie still."

I obeyed and felt the tip of her tongue run in rapid, circular motion across my stomach. I felt my flesh loosen and quaver, and there were moments that the art was unendurable, like a poor man suddenly showered with extreme wealth. I was conscious that my hand rested on her back, then I knew I was exerting pressure, until my whole being went into an unprecedented chaos.

I was aware that she was back, her lips moving lightly over my cheek, around my throat, and occasionally across my own lips. I grabbed her, clutched her desperately, knowing even a greater urge to devour her. I heard her whisper many times; I didn't recall what she was saying, for I seemed not to care. But like a man who finds a treasure, I explored her until my lips found every inch of her body.

I fell asleep near dawn, spent and happy. When I woke, she was bending over me, her breast near my cheek. I kissed it and murmured,

"I can't bear to leave you!"

"Then don't leave me, Jack," she said, brightly.

My face must have shown surprise for she continued,

"You may stay if you like, Madame won't care if I say it's all right."

"I should say something to my friend," I told her.

Karla nodded and said, "Breakfast would be a good time. We have an hour until they begin to serve."

She threw her light, nude body over me, and the hour was delightful.

CHAPTER THREE

Johnson was in the dining room when I got there. No women were in evidence, and we might have been any two business men, freshly shaven and ready for the day.

"Did you have a pleasant night?" he asked. I sighed, and he chuckled. "Karla is queen of the place. She won't even come into a room if she doesn't like the candidates she sees through the peep-hole. And she bullies Madame."

"She asked me to stay for a few days," I said. "How do I make arrangements?"

Johnson was impressed.

"I've never heard of her doing that before. I'll make it all right with Madame—remember, you're my guest."

I protested, muttering something about expense.

"It won't cost what I'm going to make on the stuff you sold me," he said. "And I'm hoping for more deals like that one. I'll put it down as a business expense."

We shook hands after breakfast.

"I have to get to the office," he said. "But be sure to look me up next time you have a deal you think

would interest me."

My thanks for a wonderful time were sincere, and he knew it.

I went back to Karla's room. It had been cleaned and put in order, and she was sitting in the window seat, looking out at the walled garden. She had a ribbon in her hair and was wearing a sweater and skirt.

"You look like a little girl."

She dimpled from a smile and said, "But I'm not."

"No," I said, and touched her breasts. She wasn't wearing anything under the sweater. But I wasn't ready to climb into bed again; it was pleasant to sit there with the sun shining in, with Karla leaning back against me and my hands uncontrolled.

We talked, and she told me how she came to be queen of Madame Fronzeh's.

It is traditional for a prostitute to claim she was betrayed by a man and forced into street-walking. Karla's story was different.

"I wanted to know about men from the time I knew there *were* men," she said. "As a kid, I just played games—you know, doctor and stuff. But that seemed silly and dirty, and I became pretty stand-offish.

"In high school, I started to go with a perfectly beautiful boy, but I acted cool when he tried to pet. Actually, I was terribly excited, but he didn't know much more than I did, and I didn't want to do anything to hurt my parents. Word gets around in school if a girl is too easy."

She moved to look at me and I kissed her; she turned a casual caress into a pulse-pounding experience.

"Anyway," she said, settling back, "they were killed in an auto crash that year. It was awful. They were young and in love and wonderful to my sister and me. We went to live with an aunt for the summer, but in the autumn we went to a girls' school in a university town. Boy!"

She was lost in her own amusing memories, and I

tickled her to get her attention.

"What happened?"

"I learned about men. I was raped—well, seduced, because I was as eager as the frat man who did it. He was clumsy, and it hurt, some, but I had no regrets. I knew it didn't have to be clumsy. . . By the time I quit school, I'd had quite a bit of experience."

"Quit?" I twisted my head to glance at the picture of the little girl graduate on the dressing table. "Didn't you graduate?"

She turned to see what I was looking at.

"Oh, no. . . I didn't." She hesitated. "That's my twin sister, Paula. I really shouldn't even have her picture here. I wouldn't want her ever to become involved in any—any embarrassment on my account. You see, she went on from school to live quite a different sort of life from mine. She's a fashion model. Respectable. I adore her, Jack! She's all the family I've got in the world, and I'd never want her to be hurt by any embarrassment connected with me. Why, it might ruin her socially and professionally if her crowd learned about me!"

I felt relieved, learning the true explanation of my mix-up. But Karla seemed so genuinely distressed. I kissed the top of her head and told her,

"You mustn't get so upset about her, baby."

"You don't understand, Jack. I've dreaded the chance that one of her friends might come here. I've never told anyone here that I even had a sister, for fear of making trouble for her. She's so different from me!"

"I understand, all right," I said, a shade grimly. Truer words were never spoken, I was thinking. Karla and Paula were as different mentally as they were alike physically. But to my mind, of the two of them Karla was by far the more respectable. She and Paula were both for sale, but while Karla was open and frank about it, Paula was an out and out phoney, holding firm for

the highest bidder.

"Let's not talk about her any more," I said. "I'd rather hear about you."

"Okay," Karla laughed. "But there's not much more to tell. I applied for a dancing job with a show troupe in town, when I left school, and I got it. I wasn't any great dancer, but I could follow steps, and they liked the way I looked."

I bit her ear, and she wriggled. Then I asked,

"How did you get to New Orleans?"

"Showboat. I didn't like the men in the company, and wouldn't let them touch me. When we hit a Mississippi town, I just took off and landed a showboat job. And so eventually I landed in New Orleans, and one of the other girls mentioned Madame's. I shied away from the idea at first. After all, just any man would be disgusting. But Madame said I could try it for a while, and she's been very nice to me."

"Hasn't any one man ever been really important to you?"

She shook her head. "Lots of girls keep slimy little rats. Not me. If I ever left here for a man, he'd have to be someone I could respect."

I was glad to hear her say that. I was already beginning to get some ideas about taking her home with me.

"Sounds like you and I feel the same way about characters like that pimp of Sarola Damon's."

"Willard Chase?" She was surprised. "You know him?"

I made a mental note of the name. Willard Chase. It belonged on my hate list.

"I've seen him—as close as I'd want to get."

She shrugged. "I know what you mean. Sarola's such a beautiful girl, too—and he's got her completely under his spell. It's hard to figure. He's made a pass or two at me, as a matter of fact." She felt me stiffen in swift anger, and laughed, snuggling against me. "Don't worry. I wouldn't have anything to do with him, even if

there were no question of my loyalty to Sarola. I'm true to my friends, Jack."

She twisted around in my arms and my body flamed. We stayed right there on the broad window seat. It wasn't perfect comfort, but it had the piquancy of novelty and, after all, there would be other times.

We were together for three days at Madame's. Then Johnson phoned to say Midge Hunt, my secretary, had gotten in touch with him, trying to find me. I could not spend my life in a brothel, even if the question of money did not arise, as it certainly would. So one morning I woke before Karla had, shaved and dressed, and then stood by the bed. I bent and kissed her everywhere. She smiled at me drowsily and said,

"Goodbye, Jack." Then she was asleep again, or seemed to be, and I left.

CHAPTER FOUR

I intended to go back, next Mardi Gras, or next time I had business in New Orleans, or possibly even sooner. In fact, within a week, I realized that my intentions were to return to New Orleans without further delay and take Karla out of Madame's even if I had to kidnap her—that's how hard she'd hit me; it just took me a little while to realize I had it that bad.

In that week, I never called any of the other girls I knew. I'd get as far as the phone on a lonely evening in my apartment, and then I'd find myself visualizing Karla as she'd looked in that honey-gold chiffon gown the night I met her, as she'd looked in nothing but her own pale gold loveliness as she offered herself to me—and the phone would drop from my trembling hand. No other woman would do.

A week of this, and I was a wreck. After all, I could-

n't just let my business go to pot while I made a fast trip to New Orleans and waited my turn in Fronzeh's parlor every time I felt like seeing Karla. I'd have to try to take Karla out of that house and set her up in her own apartment here in town. She'd said if she ever left Madame's for a man, it would have to be one she could respect. Well, I'd have to be that one.

If my cash value appealed to a golddigger like Karla's sister, it would certainly satisfy Karla, to whom money was not the sole object. And she wasn't the kind, either, to insist on a ring. She was honest and straightforward enough to go along with a situation like mine, so long as we both liked it, and to break it up when we both got tired of it.

Tired of it? I wondered. I'd always considered myself a bachelor by nature. A variety of women is the spice of life to a bachelors' existence, I firmly believed. One of my girls had once said anyone could tell I was a lecher, just by looking at my apartment. She was kidding, I think, but there was no doubt I arranged the place for comfort at all times. There were three rooms, a small kitchen, a mirrored bedroom, and a really beautiful living room. When I saw anything I fancied, I bought it, and my taste ran to the lavish in fabrics and decoration. I'd had it pretty good, living here alone—till now.

Now I wasn't so sure. I paced the floor of my apartment, contemplating the prospect of another lonely evening—the seventh consecutive evening in a week I'd ended up dining alone in town and coming back here to sleep alone. Not for any lack of attractive possibilities for feminine companionship, either, because I had an address book listing numerous beauties I could have called. . .if Karla hadn't been on my mind.

If this went on much longer, I'd be ready to drop everything and head for New Orleans even if it meant letting my whole business fold. Never before in my life had I let a woman interfere with business, I re-

flected grimly as I stripped to take a tepid shower—supposed to be soothing to the nerves. What I had of worldly goods I'd made myself, clawing my way up from stock clerk to salesman to assistant buyer, to buyer, to my own purchasing outfit. And I wasn't the type to throw it all over because I'd lost my head over a woman. Not me. I'd have to cool down, and figure a way to get the woman without lousing up the business.

As I stepped out of the not particularly soothing shower and dried myself, I looked in the full length mirror critically. It was a source of gratification to me that my physical condition was perfect. I confined my athletics to the golf course and the bedroom, I drank when I was thirsty, and I enjoyed good food. Also, my years had been lived hard. But they hadn't left many marks. I had a good chest expansion, my belly was flat, and my hair was thick.

Karla had reacted to me, I was pretty sure, about as hard as I'd reacted to her. She'd certainly be tempted at least to consider any offer I made her just because we were so great together. If in so many years I'd never found a sex partner who surpassed her, I doubted that in her twenty years she'd ever found one she liked better than me. If that were true, it should be enough to convince her she ought to become my mistress.

Not my wife. It wasn't because of the fact that she was a whore that I refused to consider marriage. Contrary to the way I'd originally felt about prostitutes, she had changed all of that. It made no difference to me now what she had been or done in her life. What interested me was her attitude. An honest whore like Karla had a finer code of ethics and a deeper sense of honor than her untouchable tramp of a twin sister could ever begin to comprehend. So that wasn't my reason for not wanting to make it legal with Karla.

I just couldn't see marriage in the cards for myself. Sure, it had often occurred to me that a beautiful and vibrant wife would be an exciting possession, and I

had thought more than once of fatherhood. A man with a wife other men admired but couldn't have, and with a son to whom he could leave a respected name and a powerful fortune, was a lucky man.

I thought it all over, coolly, for another few weeks. Business first, I decided. I had contracted for some goods by then, and I had to get it moving. In my line, you couldn't hold on to what you bought for any length of time. Storage costs cut into the profit, market values changed, and time was of the essence. I had a couple of other deals pending that would require my immediate attention. One would take me to Miami for a couple of days. . .

When everything current was wound up, if I still felt the same way, I'd head for New Orleans, lay my cards on the table with Karla, and take my chances she'd like what I was offering.

CHAPTER FIVE

For a long time afterward, I wondered just how different things might have been—for all of us—if only I'd obeyed my impulse, and stopped in New Orleans before going to Miami.

There are times when even a hard-headed self-made man should listen to his heart instead of his hard head. This was one of those times, I suppose.

As it was, having a few hours to kill before I could complete the transaction that had brought me to Miami, I decided to go on out to the track and try out a couple of tips my client had given me. When the horses were not occupying my full attention, I glanced idly around at the stands. And that's when I thought I saw Karla.

I appeared to have recognized her at once, even though her back was turned to me. There was no mistaking that shapely form, clad now in a trim beige suit, or that honey gold hair which could belong to only

one girl in the world. Or one other, maybe. Her twin sister. But this couldn't be Paula, my weak brain told me. A second look seemed to assure me of that. This had to be Karla. Because the man to whose arm she was clinging possessively, into whose eyes she was gazing adoringly, was a man I had seen just once before—dressed in the horns and tail and scarlet cape of a devil!

For a few minutes—I had no idea how long—I was stunned. To quiet my reeling senses, I tried telling myself that I must be wrong, this couldn't be Karla with that pimp she herself had referred to as a slimy rat!

But when I put the binoculars on them and brought them into sharp focus, my worst fears were confirmed. The man was the same, all right, the red devil I'd last seen tossing a drink into the face of the whore who kept him, Willard Chase. I hadn't forgotten the name, and I wasn't likely to forget that face either. The arrogant expression was the same. The aloof, mocking indifference he displayed toward the beautiful girl with him was the same. It happened to be a different girl, this time. But from where I stood, it looked to me like Karla was reacting to him the way Sarola had—letting him push her around.

I shoved my glasses back into the case slung from my shoulder. I'd seen all I wanted to see. I should have known, I told myself as I turned and left the park. Hadn't Karla admitted to me that Chase had been making passes at her? She's implied that she'd turned him down out of loyalty to Sarola—but it looked like her loyalty didn't go very deep. She'd led me to believe she wouldn't have anything to do with a pimp—but obviously she hadn't meant that, either. So it seemed Karla wasn't any more genuine than the allegedly respectable Paula.

Vaguely, I was aware of the loudspeaker announcing the winner. My horse had lost. Another disappointment

—but unnoticed. I began to hurry because I had to get away from there.

Back at my hotel, I cancelled my New Orleans reservations before going on to meet my customer for drinks downstairs. And when I got to the bar, I made mine doubles.

"I've had some bad news," I remarked, by way of explanation when my customer glanced at me inquiringly as I downed my third.

And that's the way I felt about it. I should have been glad this had happened, to wise me up before I could get more involved with her. But I wasn't glad. You don't find something like Karla every day, and having her spoiled like this was hard to take. How different would things have turned out if I'd made it back to Fronzeh's before Chase had got his hands on her?

At my office again, I kept as busy as I could, trying to get the whole episode off my mind. I wasn't going to let any lying little whore get me down. For the present, the only way I knew to forget her was in my work, and I concentrated on that to the exclusion of everything else.

Marty Meeker called a couple of times to suggest a round of golf. The second time I declined, saying I was tied up, he sounded puzzled and even a little hurt, on the phone.

Meeker was my closest competitor in business, and also one of my closest friends. We didn't operate the same way. He wasn't the go-getter I was, and I could hardly have the easy-going attitude of a man like Meeker, who had inherited his business. But he knew I'd always levelled with him on everything, and he appreciated that. I threw anything his way I could, and he did likewise, so we got along fine.

I hadn't called him for several weeks, and when I passed up the golf invitations, he naturally wondered.

"Seriously," I explained, "I'd like nothing better than to take you up, Marty, but I've got my hands full here at the office."

"You need some help," he suggested. "A salesman." He'd sent me my secretary, and she'd proved satisfactory for over a year now. He was ready, apparently, to recommend any other additions to my staff I might need.

I hung up, and cursed Karla for the thousandth time for the way she still seemed to be lousing me up. Why couldn't I forget her? I had her number, I knew her for what she really was. So why not just cross her off?

But it wasn't that easy. The memory of those three days and nights with her was still too vivid—so vivid it hurt, bad. Even Meeker had sensed something was wrong. So had my secretary—and she wasn't a girl to notice much that wasn't spelled out for her.

When Meeker had recommended Miss Hunt to me, I had wondered just how well he knew her. He couldn't can the secretary he'd had for years, a horsey looking woman with a drunk for a husband, so he sent the girl over to me. Midge did her work, such as it was, competently. She brightened up the reception room, had a pleasant telephone voice, and most important, she didn't excite me, so she was a satisfactory secretary, from my point of view.

As a matter of fact, lately, it seemed that nothing could arouse me. I had quit even bothering to go out, and even Miss Hunt noticed it when I refused to take any calls that were not connected with business. When I told her curtly, "Just say I'm out," every time she announced, "A woman on the phone—says it's personal. . ." she finally became worried.

"Mr. Heflin, you're working too hard," she pouted.

"You're right," I agreed. "I'll take time out for some laughs while I'm in New York next week."

That was just what I fully intended to do. For whatever good it would do me, I'd look up Paula when I hit

New York, and tell her off. . . Maybe then I could get her twin sister off my mind.

CHAPTER SIX

Paula wasn't so easy to locate. She'd checked out and left town, several months before, they told me at the hotel where she'd formerly been living. Then by chance, through a mutual acquaintance, I learned that she'd returned and was staying at another hotel out on Long Island. It was worth it to me to take a taxi out there and call on her.

She invited me up to her suite for cocktails, and greeted me at the door in a black and gold striped taffeta dress, extremely low-cut in her usual style.

"Jack, what a charming surprise!" she murmured.

She offered me her hand, and her whole torso wriggled in a barely perceptible sinuous ripple with the gesture, to tantalize while promising nothing.

"Same old Paula," I commented, rudely, brushing past her to enter her spacious sitting room. But even as I spoke, I knew I was mistaken. She was not the same. She had changed, somehow.

I studied her, looking for the change, as her eyebrows arched in indignation and her hazel eyes flashed gold sparks. She pressed her beautiful lips firmly together, not deigning to acknowledge my remark with a reply, and for a moment we stood there staring at each other.

"I take it back," I said then. "You're different. When you held out on me last time I was here, you still had something to hold out. You don't any more. You look like a girl who's been had, but good."

I was guessing, but the way her face blanched and stiffened to a pale mask of fury told me I'd guessed right.

"I take it back, too," she said, icily. "I invited you

up for a drink, assuming you could still behave like a gentleman. Since it is obvious you've come only to insult me, I withdraw the invitation. You may leave." She gestured to the door, this time without rippling.

"Before I go, I've got some advice for you. You ought to tell that twin sister of yours she doesn't have to worry any more about keeping your existence a secret, now that your precious virtue and respectability no longer have to be protected from scandal. You owe her that much. She's got troubles enough of her own without having to worry about your supposedly unbesmirched reputation."

Paula's eyes narrowed swiftly.

"// I ever meet this imaginary twin sister," she said, acidly, "I'll give her your regards and let her know how concerned you were about her imaginary troubles. Now—" She moved to the door and flung it open.

"You do that, Paula," I said. I paused, in the doorway. "Karla isn't imaginary, and neither are her troubles. A prostitute can't get into much worse trouble than to get mixed up with a guy like Willard Chase. . . You give her my regards, *and* my condolences."

I was already regretting my viciousness. I'd never pulled a scene like this with a woman before, but somehow Paula brought out the worst in me, and seeing her again, while I had still not recovered from my disillusionment about Karla, had proved just too much. The combination of the two of them would put any man in a pretty ugly mood, I thought.

But certainly I hadn't expected my rudeness to have such an effect on Paula. She sagged against the door frame, crumpled, staring at me with stricken eyes.

What had upset her so? My calling Karla a prostitute? That was no news to her. . . Did she know something, maybe, about what kind of rat Chase was? That was possible. She'd been out of town, I knew. Could be she'd seen Karla, heard about Chase. Right then I

should've known something wasn't exactly like I'd thought.

Anyway she was staring at me now, as shocked as if I'd struck her. I hadn't meant to shake her up that much. Feeling like a complete heel, I turned and left. As I strode down the thickly carpeted hall toward the elevators, I did not look back, but I sensed that she was still standing there in the doorway, stunned.

I spent the rest of my stay in New York hating myself for what seemed, afterward, like a lot of unnecessary viciousness on my part. I'd tried to get Karla off my mind by hurting her sister. It hadn't worked, and I was mad at myself for even trying.

Being mad at Paula and then at Karla had only made matters worse. But getting mad at myself had the effect, it seemed, of forcing me to snap out of it. I could not forget Karla, I realized, until I stopped wanting her. And to do that, I'd better try to replace her. . .

Among the messages Miss Hunt had taken for me during my absence, I found Deana's name, twice, when I returned. I hadn't seen Deana for some time now. I let myself start remembering her, and I found the memories well worth reviewing.

I had met her when I went to the dentist for a cleaning and found he had a new assistant.

She was a pocket-size, about five feet three and no more than a hundred and ten pounds. Her skin was white, her hair a silken auburn, her body perfect except that one breast was noticeably smaller than the other. She made no attempt to hide the difference with falsies, and it added a piquant charm. Anyway, I found it charming; and so did others—I suspected the dentist did not keep her around for her skill at her job, which wasn't great.

I called her now, at the dentist's from my office, as soon as I had taken care of the few necessary details

that demanded my immediate attention. I grinned at the cool impersonal lilt of her professional telephone voice and guessed that there must be patients in the reception room as she replied, "Yes, Mr. Heflin. Did you want an appointment?"

"Never wanted one more. How about tonight?"

"I'm sorry, that won't be possible."

Patients or no patients, she didn't have to be that cool, I thought. But then, I decided, she'd been told by Miss Hunt at least twice that I was out when she called, and she could be feeling a little miffed over my recent neglect of her. Couldn't blame her, at that.

"Maybe you could suggest a time," I ventured, playing it her way. "But make it this week—please."

A moment's silence. Then a little warmth came into her voice and I could picture her hiding a smile as she pretended to study the dentist's appointment book while she replied, "Thursday would be all right. . ."

"Pick you up around eight?"

"That would be just fine."

I felt good as I hung up. This was Tuesday. Now I had the pleasant prospect of Thursday night at eight to brighten the next couple of days, and I didn't mind so much the fact that business had slacked off to the point where I was going to have idle time on my hands for a while. With Deana to look forward to, I wouldn't spend all of it brooding about Karla.

That's what I thought on Tuesday. Wednesday passed uneventfully enough, and Thursday morning the weather turned hot, hot enough so I had Miss Hunt leave the office door open, since the architect who planned the building had not managed cross ventilation for the private offices. I had nothing to do Thursday afternoon but contemplate Deana's remembered charms and gaze at Miss Hunt's lack of same, when I heard the outer door open.

Miss Hunt looked up casually, then stiffened. It was several seconds before she could manage the formal-

ities and flick the switch on the inter-office communicator. I knew that even if she announced Dracula, I'd talk to him, just to see what had impressed her so much.

It was with the feeling, then, that a nightmare was closing in on me, that I heard her announce, "A Mr. Willard Chase to see you, sir."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I let him do the talking. I stood to find out more that way, of course, and that would have been a good reason for keeping my own mouth shut. But the fact was, I couldn't have talked if I'd tried. The shock had left me speechless. All I could manage, after mouthing the customary amenities in a sort of daze when Willard Chase entered my office, was to motion him to a chair and stare at him.

On closer view, I had to admit that he did not seem quite so well suited to the red devil's costume in which I'd first seen him. His features were pleasant but not distinguished. His hair was brown and worn a little longer than was then fashionable, and his eyes were an honest blue. His handclasp was firm, his smile disarmingly boyish. As he accepted the chair I'd indicated, he seemed completely at ease while at the same time tall, erect and alert, with none of the sloppy slouching with which some men try to display relaxation, but which to me, suggests only insolence and discourtesy.

"Mr. Heflin," he said, "I want you to know why I picked your outfit in applying for a sales position. It's a successful business, sure, but so are lots of others. The thing is that I'm—" here he grinned engagingly—"well, ambitious. I want to be with the top business in its line, and I think yours is it."

He sat back, waiting for me to react. This boy was

glib. I should have expected that, I was telling myself. He seemed not in the least uncomfortable under my fixed stare.

Where had he heard about me? I was asking myself. Not hard to guess. From Karla, of course. But I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of knowing I realized that. And I wasn't going to let him know I gave a damn about Karla, either.

When I spoke, finally, it was not what I intended to say. I blurted it before I could stop myself.

"Who sent you here?"

He looked mildly puzzled.

"Coming here was my own idea. As I say, I want to get ahead. I figure the best way to get there is to tie up with a firm headed by a man I can respect and understand." The grin again. "Everyone says Heflin is a go-getter." The blue eyes still looked faintly puzzled, and the eyebrows went up questioningly.

"I thought Meeker might have referred you to me," I muttered—and immediately was mad at myself for finding it necessary to explain anything to this guy.

"Meeker?" he repeated, and shook his head, smiling. "I haven't seen him about a job. I hear he's a sweet guy—but I'd rather work for you."

I wasn't going to do any more talking, since it looked like I couldn't keep from putting my foot in it. I let Chase go on.

He went on for almost an hour, and in spite of myself I listened with real interest. So did Miss Hunt, as I could tell from her lack of motion. She was tense, gripped. She could not see Chase from her desk, but she probably had his features graven on her brain; she seemed like a girl struck dumb with infatuation.

As he told it, Chase had been the petted youngest son of a family with plenty of cash—not rich, exactly, but well enough off so that he need never have worked. He was ambitious even as a kid, though—sold magazine subscriptions, worked in local stores, dreamed of

being a tycoon. His folks insisted on college, but he thought it a waste of time while he was there. "I was no great shakes at books, anyway," he said modestly.

He brushed lightly over an impulsive marriage from which a paternal check freed him, and I found myself resenting the girl who had taken advantage of his eager youth, admiring his decency in not speaking of her harshly.

He had held several selling jobs, left each for a better one, finally coming to me.

During the last half of his recital, Miss Hunt had begun to move, clenching her fists at the thought of the tramp who had tricked Chase into marriage, nodding approval each time Chase moved to a better job, straightening in respect at his final words. Without her byplay, I might have fallen entirely under his spell myself. But suddenly I could vividly picture Miss Hunt dressed as a slave girl, wrists and ankles clanking with heavy bracelets, holding still for a drink dashed contemptuously in her face. . . . And just in time I reminded myself that Chase had carefully omitted from his story whole episodes—involving time he had spent in New Orleans, and Miami.

"I'm sorry," I said brusquely, and stood up, clearly showing him he was dismissed. "Probably what you heard about me made it sound like I was in a big hurry to make a million. But I have my own way of operating, and I keep it clean. This business is in good shape now, and I'm not contemplating any changes."

Apparently Chase could take insults the way I'd seen him dish them out—to a woman. He smiled, and rose.

"Well, thanks for listening to me, anyway," he said. "Maybe you'll need someone later on, and if I'm not tied up, I hope you'll remember me. I still think yours is the best firm in the line."

He offered his hand, and before I knew what I was doing I had offered mine. I even said, "Good luck,"

as we shook hands. I sat down in a daze as he went out.

He stopped in the reception room to say a few words to Miss Hunt. She devoured him with her eyes and almost panted. But his manner was respectful, and he left with a casual wave of the hand.

She sat watching the door that closed behind him, and after a long silent moment turned to gaze at me with a hurt, reproachful look. Her rather vapid face was crumpled, like a broken blossom trodden upon and bruised by some uncaring foot, and made me feel that in turning Chase down I had deeply wounded her.

Now just what the hell was going on, I asked myself, baffled and angry? Elbows propped on my desk, I held my aching head in both hands, trying to figure the situation out.

I couldn't escape the nagging feeling that I'd sized Chase up wrong. How would I have reacted to him if this little interview in my office had been my first encounter with him, I wondered—if I'd never seen or heard of him before? Would I have hired him?

I doubted it. He was just too glib, his every expression and implication so skillful I couldn't have believed him if I'd known nothing at all about his past. He was too Goddamned lovable to be real. ..Or was he?

Suddenly I was all mixed up again, because I was remembering how I'd misjudged Karla, the first time I'd met her, mistaking her for her twin sister; and how, correcting that first mistake, I'd sized her up wrong again, believing her to be genuine—until I'd spotted her at the track with Chase!

But what if I'd been wrong again, the second time? What if Karla really was the kind of girl she'd seemed to me during those three days at Fronzeh's—the three happiest days and nights of my life? I wanted to believe that, more than I'd wanted anything. But I still couldn't make it jibe with the fact that I'd seen her later acting mighty cozy with Sarola Damon's kept man.

Was it possible, I wondered, with a swift sinking sensation as if the whole world was coming apart at the seams—was it possible that Chase was twins too? One a pimp, one a nice clean-cut guy who was willing to work hard for a living—the kind of guy I wouldn't mind having taken Karla to the races?

I groaned aloud, calling an abrupt halt to my wild speculations. The whole thing was fantastic. One confusing set of twins was believable; but two sets of twins was too much coincidence—it couldn't happen.

Somehow, I pulled myself together, and looked up with a start, fearing Miss Hunt might have observed my mental hassel.

But Miss Hunt wasn't there. Apparently she'd already gone to lunch. That wasn't a bad idea. I'd do the same, I decided—but today, I'd drink mine.

The streets were crowded and clammy in the heat. I headed for the nearest hotel where I could get a sandwich and something long and cool in a dim setting.

I saw Chase and Miss Hunt as soon as I was seated. He was eating and talking. She was just gaping at him.

The nightmare was closing in on me again. Just when I thought I'd got things settled in my mind, the question-and-answer game started all over—with ten possible answers to every question.

What kind of guy was this Chase? What had brought him to town—and to me, anyway? Had Karla come with him? Just how determined was he to get a job with me, and why? Did he think that seducing my secretary would do him any good? Was he really the louse I'd figured him for? Or could it be that he wasn't quite as bad as all that? What did he really mean to Karla?

The questions went around and around in my mind. I gulped my drink, left my sandwich untouched, and got out of there. Miss Hunt was in mortal danger, I thought, grimly, but she was big enough if not smart enough to look after herself. I had troubles of my own, without trying to rescue dumb secretaries from the

clutches of unscrupulous males like Chase.

I'd better call it a day, as far as the office was concerned, I decided. I stopped in to leave a note in Miss Hunt's typewriter that I wouldn't be back, and took a quick glance at my calendar to see if any appointments were listed.

There was just one notation under today's date: "Deana—Thursday, 8PM."

I'd been looking forward to it since Tuesday. The morning's events had completely swept it from my mind. I was more thankful than ever that I'd made the date. I would count on Deana to take my mind off the whole mess.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Deana was ready when I called for her. She never kept me waiting. Her heavy hair was piled high on her head, and she was wearing a filmy dress of palest green. It was cut quite high, so that it outlined her piquant, not-quite matching breasts. If a man noticed her at all—and most men would—he would notice the breasts. His eye would linger, move over her small rounded contours. . . . No, the deformity was no drawback for Deana.

"You've been neglecting me," she reminded me—not feeling injured about it, but just putting me in my place.

"Work," I said, helping her into my car. "It's been harder on me than on you, believe me. Maybe we can start making up for lost time."

"We can try," she said lightly. "Let's start with dinner and dancing at the Idlewild."

"Check."

The Idlewild was suburban swank, which was why Deana liked it. But there was much to commend it outside of that, this particular evening. The place had a

good cook, a fine wine cellar, and was air-cooled, not chilled. The drive out, which would have been hectic with dust and honking horns at five or six, was comparatively quiet after eight, and I drove fast to create a refreshing breeze.

We found the Idlewild crowded—Deana whistled at the number of Jags and Caddies parked around it when we drew up. But we got a table next to the dance floor, and I ordered champagne, which Deana loved.

We ate well and danced several times. I enjoyed having other men look at her, and I let myself remember that soon her curves would be against my body, in another way, in bed.

One of the men who looked at Deana seemed familiar to me, though I couldn't place him at the moment.

"Who's your admirer, Dee?" I asked. "The one walking around the edge of the dance floor now."

She looked around, then shook her head.

"It's Larry Lozzati, and he's no admirer of mine."

It was my turn to whistle. I'd seen him, all right; I'd seen him in the papers whenever some racket was being investigated, whenever some gunman was knocked off. Word had it that Lozzati ran everything big and illegal in the city.

I let my eyes follow him as he made his way around the dancers, heading for a table across the floor. He wasn't a bad looking man; I'd have put him down as an actor. He was lean, a little over middle-height. His hair and eyes were black, his face sensitive and wary.

"What do you mean, he doesn't admire you? What'd you do, forget his dental appointment?"

Deana laughed.

"He's never even seen me before, if he saw me now," she said. "What I meant was that all his admiration goes somewhere else. He's keeping Sarola Damon."

Lozzati had reached his table by then, and I saw Sarola at the same time Deana spoke her name.

The sensuous dance music went on, but I had stopped cold in the middle of the floor.

"What's the matter?" Deana asked.

"Sorry," I said. "Come on, let's sit down—do you mind?"

"Not especially," she said as we returned to our table, "but what hit you?"

"The explanation to a couple of things that have been bothering me—I think." And the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that it all fit.

Sarola was the reason for Chase being in town. Maybe Karla had dropped him, maybe he'd dropped her—that part was unimportant. Whatever had happened, he'd come here to look up Sarola, I figured. And the reason why he'd been forced to try to get a legitimate job was pretty clear, too, I thought. Lozatti must have scared Chase off—and very likely Sarola had proved indifferent to his charms, because to judge from the way these two were looking at each other now, they meant it for keeps. This was a one-woman man who had found the one woman, and Sarola looked radiant under his adoring gaze.

A lot of the confusion was cleared up in my mind now. It still wasn't the way I wanted it. I wished I could figure it out to make Karla look better. But that's the way it was. I felt pretty sure of it.

And because it was such a relief to get it straightened out in my mind, my mood brightened considerably.

Deana noticed it.

"Okay," she said, "don't tell me. Whatever it was, it picked up your spirits, which is good. Remember, we've got some lost time to make up for."

She was pleasantly vague now from the champagne. We left, and she let her head rest on my arm as I drove. By the time we opened my apartment door, I was as excited as a kid.

She stood there, silent, until she heard the door slam behind me. Then she whirled around, so close

that her breasts touched me. I reached for her, but she crinkled her nose and ran across the room, heading for the door on the other side. Her heels were high, the edge of the rug was curled, and she stumbled and let herself fall full length. She lay there, laughing, and I threw myself down beside her.

"Witch!" I said, and buried my face in the curve of her shoulder and neck. She smelled of flesh and perfume, she tasted slightly of salt where her upswept hair had come a little loose, and her skin was faintly damp.

I let my hand go to her smaller breast, and she wriggled happily.

I moved so that my weight was on her, but she didn't mind at all. "I like big men," she had told me once, when I teased her about being pocket-sized.

"Are you comfortable?" I whispered. I knew Deana so well that there was no danger of breaking her mood. She was as eager as I was.

She thought it over.

"Not really," she said. "Carry me inside."

I picked her up—it was like carrying a child—and carried her to the bedroom, her pale green dress floating around us, her red hair now loosening entirely and falling over her shoulder and mine.

I put her on the bed and would have lain beside her, but she sat up.

"Let me take this dress off," she said. "It cost a lot and I don't want it torn."

"You make me sound wild," I laughed.

The nose crinkled. I lay back on the bed and watched as she unzipped the dress and let it fall around her. Under it she was wearing a matching slip, and under that nothing. She kicked off her sandals, and I began to undress.

"Oh," she said as an afterthought, before coming to bed, "I can't stay all night. You'll have to take me home."

"It's a deal," I said, "and would you please stop chatting when a man here is in agony?"

"I would," she giggled, and dived at me.

CHAPTER NINE

The weather stayed hot for a couple of weeks before breaking suddenly. There were even a couple of times when Deana and I spent an evening together and went to bed separately, both of us too worn out by the weather to contemplate anything else—but at least I felt pretty sure I could blame it on the weather, and give Deana credit, otherwise, for restoring me to normal after the long lull in which Karla had left me.

The first cool day, I breezed into the office feeling like a new man.

"Wonderful morning to you, Midge," I said to Miss Hunt.

Her answering greeting trailed after me as I went into my office, and then I did a double take. She sounded miserable. It was my imagination, I decided, and I turned to the work that awaited me.

Marty Meeker phoned in the middle of the morning.

"How about some golf, Jack?" he suggested. "It's the first day it's been cool enough to play."

My desk was almost clear, but I still had a lot of excess energy.

"Sure," I said. "Meet you at the club at one."

I kept sports clothes in my locker at the club. The attendant told me Meeker and "another gentleman" were waiting for me, and I hurried into my slacks.

They were standing in front of the clubhouse, Marty looking a little pale, a little done-in by the past few weeks of heat, the other man an ad for expensive sports clothes in pearl grey gabardine slacks, his tan accen-

tuated by his pale blue zipper shirt, open at the neck. I knew who he was before he turned around. Willard Chase.

"Here's Jack," Marty said. "Jack Heflin, our toughest competitor, Willard Chase, my new right-hand man."

I held out my hand, wondering just how to indicate that I knew Chase already.

But Chase apparently preferred to keep our previous meeting in my office a secret.

"How do you do, Mr. Heflin," he said. "Mr. Meeker has told me a lot about you."

"What's all this *mister* stuff?" Marty said heartily. "It's Marty, Jack, and—what do you like to be called by your friends?" he asked Chase.

"Not W. C.," I suggested, expecting Chase to get just a little irritable. But he grinned.

"No, that gave me enough trouble in school. My folks called me Willie, which I hate. How about Will?"

So Will it was, and I noticed that Marty used the name as affectionately as if Chase had been his son. He couldn't have been more than ten years Chase's senior, but it was clear that he felt protective admiration for the younger man.

Chase teed off first; he looked like a pro. His stance was perfect, his swing had power. I hoped he'd slip and fall on his face, but he didn't. He stayed perfect for eighteen holes, so that Marty's nice game and my usual ninety-six looked totally inept. Good old Willie shot a seventy-five and wasn't in a trap once.

The energy that had filled me in the morning deserted me, and by the time we started back to the clubhouse Marty looked lousy too. I could believe the stories about his heart when I saw his pallor and heard him wheeze. Chase still looked as chipper as a virgin debutante.

While we waited for our drinks—bourbon highballs for Marty and me, a bottle of ale for Chase—I found myself wrestling with all the old questions again. The

biggest question was still: what kind of a guy is this Chase?—because the answer to this one would give me the answer to the other one: what kind of girl is Karla?

Bad as I wanted to change the answer to the second question, I still couldn't get the right answer for the first one. Right now, Chase was a man who could beat me at golf and make me admire the licking I took. He looked honest, and could talk a bird off a tree. What did all that add up to? Marty had hired him, and Marty was no dope. At the moment, Marty seemed to feel that putting Chase on his staff as salesman was the smartest move he'd ever made, and I doubted that anything I might say would change his mind.

What could I say, anyway? I had no proof. Johnson and Karla had both told me Chase was Sarola Damon's kept man, but they might both have been wrong about that—and even if they'd been right, maybe that didn't necessarily mean Chase was no good for Marty. . . It just meant he was no good for me. Could an ex-pimp be a valuable member of a sales staff like Meeker's? I had my own opinion about that—but Marty was entitled to his own opinion too. I'd be out of line, I decided, if I tried to interfere.

So it was really mainly for my own sake that I was so anxious to check on a few details. I knew it would not get me anywhere to ask Chase pointblank, "When did you last see Karla?" or "Isn't Sarola keeping you any more?" At most, I might momentarily startle him that way, but he was glib enough to smooth it over.

Instead, I tried a less direct approach.

"You're new in town?" I began, conversationally, when our drinks arrived.

"That's right, Jack," Chase replied, amiably. "I've been with Marty just a little over a week now."

"Then you probably haven't had time to get acquainted here yet. I was thinking I'd seen you the other night with a stunning woman—" I was getting ready

to mention Sarola Damon's name.

But Chase's boyishly disarming laugh interrupted me.

"Oh, I've been getting around," he said easily, with a wink that brought an indulgent smile to Marty's face.

"Will seems to be quite the ladies' man," Marty said, affectionately.

I shrugged. What was the use? I reached for my pencil to sign the check when Marty made no move to pick it up, even though he'd done the inviting.

But Chase said, "This is on me," and handed the waiter a bill.

We headed for our lockers, then, and merely waved when we saw each other later, getting into our cars. I swung out of the parking lot and had to wait before I could turn into the road. In my rear view mirror I could see Marty in his convertible, looking tired and sick beside the glowing Chase.

Marty was fumbling in his wallet. He drew out a bill and handed it to Chase. I tore my gaze away and started my car.

Now, what was that all about? I wondered. Was Marty repaying Chase for having paid the check? Why? The various possibilities presented themselves to my mind to further complicate my confusion until suddenly, taking a sharp curve too wide on the highway and narrowly missing an oncoming truck, I brought myself up short. This had to stop, I realized, aware that my hands on the wheel were trembling.

Every time I ran into that guy, he threw me into a state of chaos and confusion. Either I'd have to find out all about him—and about the various people who seemed to be involved with him and with me—or else I'd have to quit asking myself all these unanswerable questions about him. Otherwise I'd go crazy, if I wasn't already.

The cooler weather inspired a lot of people; business was brisk in the next few days. I had contracted for some goods and I had to get it moving. I spent my time at the telephone and the results were fair.

But I had counted on a big order from a star customer, owner of a chain of outlet stores, and he failed me. It was a blow.

"I'm really disappointed," I said; "I was sure you needed these items, and I made the price as reasonable as possible."

"Well—, not *quite* as reasonable," he said.

My ears pricked up.

"You mean it's a matter of price?"

"No, no, not any more," he said hastily. "You see, I did need this stuff, and I meant to buy it from you. But exactly the same kind was offered to me by—by another source, and at such an attractive price. . ."

He had bought elsewhere and my chances of selling him were gone, I knew that. But he was still my customer if I played it right, and there would be other goods to sell.

"You should have told me about the other offer," I said, my voice full of friendly reproach. "We know each other well enough so that a few pennies—"

"It wasn't a few pennies," he said flatly. "This party either got the stuff for peanuts, or didn't make a dime; that's how low the price was. Do you blame me for buying?"

"No, I don't," I told him. "You have to look out for yourself. But I hope this doesn't mean our pleasant association—"

"Don't worry about that, Jack," he cut in. "If you make me good offers, I'll be glad to stick with you."

It was questionable comfort, but I had to settle for it. Who was on the loose with prices far below mine? Marty? But Marty wasn't cut-throat, and, besides, such tactics suggested panic, a seller dumping because he was nervous about market conditions.

Later that day, Willard Chase dropped in to see me, quiet as a cat in slippers.

"You don't mind my working for Marty, do you?" he asked. "I didn't tell him I'd come to see you first, because he'd know then he was second best. He's too nice a chap to hurt that way."

"I'm aware there was a lot you didn't tell him. Or me," I said, wearily. This guy was an albatross, and his weight was becoming more and more oppressive, and I hadn't yet figured how to shake him. "Did you hand him the same line you did me? All that stuff about being ambitious and wanting to work for the top firm?"

Chase's face looked odd for a minute. Very likely up to that minute he hadn't suspected that I could see through him. But he recovered quickly. With a wink, he said,

"I told him I wanted to work for a long-established firm, one maybe that could use someone full of energy to give it a new spark."

"And he believed you."

"Why not? I was just telling the truth. If I can't work for you, I'm glad to work for him. It's next best, but he doesn't know it—and he wouldn't believe you if you told him."

It was meant as a warning, obviously. And I agreed.

"Probably not. That's why I haven't bothered to tell him about your application to me. . . Or about Sarola Damon, either."

Or about Karla, I was going to add, but the name stuck in my throat.

Chase never flinched. Instead, he grinned.

"So, she interests you, too? Well, I can't wish you luck with her until I'm ready to give up trying myself. Frankly, I don't think either of us stands a chance with her, but she's worth the effort."

I'd known he would have no trouble dodging the implication. I shrugged, and let it pass.

His smile was all friendliness now.

"Well, I just wanted to say hello. Do you have any advice you'd like to give me?"

"Just this: it isn't salesmanship to set your prices too low. Anyone can give stuff away."

This one got more reaction. His smile faded and I knew who had undercut me with my star customer. But he gave no other sign of being disturbed. He seemed to be considering my opinion gravely, and he nodded.

"I'll bear it in mind, Jack," he said, and went out to say a few words to Midge Hunt.

CHAPTER TEN

It didn't have to mean Midge was spying for Chase, but it was a possibility, and I mentioned it as soon as he had left the office—tactfully, but firmly.

"You know I don't mean to dictate your outside life, Midge," I said. "But are you seeing a lot of this guy Chase?"

Her face flushed.

"Why?"

"Because he just slipped in between me and Brewster on that deal. He could have found out about it several ways, but there's always the chance you accidentally mentioned something. . ."

"You don't think I told him anything that would hurt this company, do you, Mr. Heflin?" she gasped. "Why, you gave me a job when I needed it so bad, and you know I think the world of—"

"I don't think you'd hurt me on purpose, Midge; if I did, I'd just fire you and not talk about it. But I do think you might just chat about business, you know, after a couple of martinis. And I want you to remember that Chase is now our chief competitor, so that anything you tell him about my business can, and will, be used against us."

"Oh, I'll remember," she said, "and if—" She

paused and I turned back to her desk. Her face was bright red. "If we should decide to—to get married, or anything, I'd let you know right off and quit the job. It would be only fair."

I just looked at her in despair. I knew I should tell her—but I knew, too, that like Marty she'd refuse to believe anything I said about Chase.

"Yes, that would be only fair," I sighed. "You've only known him a few weeks, though. Think it over before you accept him."

I knew damn well he hadn't proposed, but her face lit up at the way I had phrased it.

"Oh, I will," she said.

I figured if she ever did get the chance she would think it over for a good two seconds before she said yes.

Word got to me that a sizable amount of goods, originally war surplus, was being held by a man named Cyrus Mitchkin. I had customers who would be willing to pay respectable sums for many of the items, and the only thing that held up an immediate deal was what I knew about Mitchkin.

He was an elderly eccentric. He had whims and the money to indulge them. If he was caught in the right mood, at the right moment, he might buy anything for a fabulous sum—or sell it for buttons. But he wouldn't deal by mail or telephone. He had to look you in the eye and like you.

I didn't know that when I first heard about his goods, unfortunately, so the first thing I did was to dictate a letter to him, asking him to phone me about a matter of mutual interest. I was careful to give no details, just in case Midge Hunt was more deceitful than I thought her. There was no reply, so after several days I put in a long distance call to his office. His secretary answered. She said she had received my letter

and mailed it on to him where he was vacationing in Santa Fe, but she doubted if he would call me in the near future. He was on his honeymoon.

That was surprising in itself—the man was in his seventies, I understood—but that was irrelevant.

"You might phone him, though," she added, doubtfully. "He has been taking some calls."

I thanked her profusely and got his address. He was stopping at La Fonda. As soon as she hung up I placed the call, then wired some flowers to the secretary, in gratitude. The long distance operator called back to report that Mitchkin was not at his hotel, having gone to a horse show. They had a number he'd left with the desk clerk, and I tried calling it. But he couldn't be reached, and there was no point in talking to anyone else.

Waiting can drive me crazy. There was no telling what Mitchkin might do. He could decide to make a gift of that warehouse full of stuff before I could reach him by phone.

I put in my last call of the day, this one to the airport, and went home to pack an overnight bag.

Morning saw me en route. It was a bumpy flight and we had some engine trouble that brought us down near Albuquerque. It was late afternoon by the time I reached Santa Fe. It was the eve of the annual fiesta, and Las Fonda was gay and crowded. I asked at the desk for Mitchkin.

"He's in his suite," the clerk said, "but he asked not to be disturbed by anyone." That was a disappointment, but at least no one else could get at him either.

It left me with an evening, and no one to spend it with. The clerk saw my hesitation.

"Mrs. Mitchkin is in the cantina," he said; "she just went by here with a friend."

"Thanks a lot," I said, "but I've never met her and she may not want to be disturbed." I had put a few loose bills in my pocket for fast tipping. Now I casu-

ally played with one of them, folding it and twisting it through my fingers.

"Oh, I'm sure she won't mind, sir," he said eagerly. "She's the beautiful woman in the red dress and mantilla—blonde." I smiled my thanks and the bill changed hands without either of us looking down.

I had gathered several things from the brief talk. One, Mrs. Mitchkin was beautiful; two, she was probably quite young; three, she was dressed for the fiesta and escorted by a friend, while the elderly bridegroom had retired. Furthermore, she was not the sort to fly into a dignified rage if a stranger introduced himself. If she had been, the clerk wouldn't have dared smooth the path for a measly tip.

I spotted the red mantilla as soon as I walked into the crowded cantina, but it didn't hold my attention long. Sitting across from it was none other than Willard Chase—smiling his boyish smile, tossing back his errant forelock, turning on the charm for Mrs. Mitchkin who had her back toward me.

I had half a mind to turn and leave on the next plane out. Why stay? Somehow the slick Chase had gotten there first, and with his usual technique had gotten in on the ground floor with the lady.

But at that moment, Chase saw me. He beckoned, and when I did not respond he rose and came towards me.

"Hello there, Jack!" he said. "Glad to see you. Here for the fiesta?" We both knew what I was there for, but I'm pretty quick on my feet too.

"I needed a rest, according to Midge, so I came here. Who's the red mantilla?" I asked.

"A friend—and married, you dog, so don't get any ideas." We had reached the table. "Mrs. Cyrus Mitchkin," he said, "my friend, Jack Heflin."

I looked down, taking the slim white hand held out

to me—and almost blacked out from shock. Dimly, I was aware of the noise of the crowd, the insistent beat of the Spanish combo playing in the cantina, but it all seemed far away. I was looking at Karla.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Karla—with Chase again! But Karla was now Mrs. Cyrus Mitchkin! All the old questions and a torrent of new ones boiled through my mind, and I felt like a man struggling to awaken from a nightmare; I felt I must run somewhere and somehow escape before madness should overtake me.

But all the time I was gazing into the golden depths of those never-forgotten eyes. And they were trying to tell me something. I read fear in Karla's eyes, and astonishment equal to my own. I realized she was begging me not to reveal that I knew her, and it seemed to me that she was trying to warn me to beware of Chase.

I obeyed what I saw in her eyes, and for the moment was unable to speak anyway beyond a murmured acknowledgement of the introduction and thanks for the invitation to join them at their table. Chase, boiling with confidence, spilling over in loud friendship for me, effusive compliments to Karla, made my silence easy, which was fortunate because the more I tried to figure things out, the more confused I became. Of course Chase seemed invariably to have that effect on me, but this time my confusion was further complicated by Karla's quiet, enigmatic presence.

She, too, appeared unable to carry on a conversation, and when Chase stopped talking for a moment, the silence at our table was deafening. She turned to me almost beseechingly and asked,

"Do you samba, Mr. Heflin?"

I couldn't have declined if I'd wanted to—and I

didn't want to. My old feeling for her overpowered every reason I'd ever had for rejecting her. I rose at once and together we moved out onto the dance floor, a safe distance from Chase.

"Jack, darling," she said. "It's been so long. Thank you for keeping our acquaintance a secret. I don't trust him." She gestured discreetly in Chase's direction.

"Is that why you invited him to join you on your honeymoon?" I asked.

Her eyes widened. She looked horrified.

"Invited him? I was as surprised to see him when he called on Cyrus this morning, as he was to learn that I was Mrs. Mitchkin! Why, I was about to ask you what connection there is between you—it was news to me, just now, that you knew him!"

She seemed as genuinely baffled as I. I wanted to believe her. . .

"You mean you didn't know he tried to get a job with me, and when I turned him down he went to work for my competitor?"

"Your competitor," she repeated, frowning. "No, he's been telling me, this afternoon, about the business he's in—and making it sound like he was at least a junior executive, if not a full partner. But he didn't happen to say where, and he never mentioned your name." The little frown line deepened on her pale forehead. On her it looked pretty. "He's working for your competitor, and you're down here on the same deal—with my husband? Is that right?"

I nodded. "Have they closed it yet?"

"I don't think so. . ." She sounded like she meant she hoped not. "Jack, is this particular deal, whatever it is, terribly important to you?"

"It's a big deal, and I'd love to close it successfully. But if you mean does my career hang by its thread, no. I've done well, Karla."

She smiled her relief.

"It seems you've done well, too," I added, wishing I didn't have to put it so sarcastically, yet determined that one way or another I had to get a couple of things straight, here. "When did you marry Mitchkin?"

"Last month."

"That would be shortly after you broke up with Chase?"

Her eyes flew open wide again, this time flashing with angry indignation.

"Jack, I don't understand you—these nasty suspicions! Until today, I hadn't seen him since he left New Orleans, and that was not long after I met you there. When I left Madame's myself, I heard about him once, in a letter from Sarola. All she said was that she'd got rid of him and was glad. I certainly wasn't expecting ever to run into him again—how I wish I hadn't! He's trouble. One word from him to Cyrus—" She shuddered. "Cyrus is a good man."

Obviously, the most doting of old husbands would not be glad to know his bride had been a whore. I was greatly pleased that Karla did not consider it necessary to ask me for my silence about her past. This meant she regarded me, and correctly, as honorable enough to keep her secret, while she feared that Chase would have no such scruples.

"Chase is cagey," I said, to reassure her, "He realizes that Mr. Mitchkin would not be likely to make a treasured business associate of a man who talked indiscreetly about his bride. For that reason, though perhaps for no other, I think you can expect Chase to keep his mouth shut."

She thought it over, and looked relieved.

"You're right. In a couple of hours this morning, Chase managed to charm Cyrus utterly. He won't want to spoil that now."

Then I just took it for granted that the deal was as good as closed. It was a disappointment, but at the moment it didn't really get me down—maybe because

what Karla had just been telling me about herself, if true, was so refreshing. She was married now, and somehow I hoped she was a faithful wife, even though that meant I had no chance with her. I could stand not having her myself if I knew Chase couldn't either—and never had.

I let myself begin to enjoy the exciting feel of Karla in my arms as we became silent and gave ourselves to the beat of the samba. So long as I was here, I reflected, I'd try at least to make the acquaintance of Cyrus Mitchkin. There'd be other deals, in the future. And besides, I wanted to see a little more of Karla, I admitted to myself.

"Would you and your husband be my dinner guests?" I asked. "I see by the fiesta posters that the hotel is serving a special dinner."

She shook her head, sadly.

"I'd love it, Jack. But Cyrus'has already promised we'd dine with Mr. Chase."

"And later on in the evening?"

"Cyrus has to retire early. He isn't supposed to exert himself."

"No?" I said, making it meaningful.

Karla let the lace of the mantilla frame her face, then looked up demurely.

"No," she said, pausing just long enough to underline the implication. Then she added, "The doctor insists that he rest. . .But you came here to meet him. We'll have to arrange that. You'll stay over till tomorrow, won't you?"

"Yes. . ." I waited. She'd hinted at her husband's physical incapacity, and made it clear that they had no plans for the evening. She knew I was free too.

But she did not suggest a rendezvous. I decided I was more relieved than sorry. Her virtue seemed more important than my own desires, somehow.

The samba ended, and as we walked back to our table she said,

"Here he comes now."

I looked around with interest. The man coming toward us was worth a look. What you first saw was a big frame clad in brilliant sports clothes—Hollywood clothes, from maroon jacket through rust-colored, pleated slacks, to thick-soled suede shoes. His shirt was a bright print with exaggerated collar points.

Once you tore your eyes away from the clothes, you saw the thinning hair, realized there wasn't much meat on the six-foot-two skeleton, and saw that the face was withered. But he had a firm handshake, and a quiet pleasant smile.

Chase greeted him decorously and introduced me. Mitchkin did not sit down, and it was clear that he wanted to get to his dinner.

"Where are you going to dine?" I asked.

"The Pink Adobe," Karla said.

I waited. It was a bald bid for an invitation. But Mitchkin was not the host, and Chase was suddenly very busy signing the cantina check.

"Well, have a fine time," I said. "I hope you don't mind talking business early tomorrow?"

"Eleven o'clock would be all right," Mitchkin replied, in no way surprised that business with him was my objective.

I watched the three of them go out, admiring Karla's poise. Either she was a remarkable actress, I thought, or else she had fewer worries than I'd imagined, now that I'd reassured her about the probability that Chase would keep her secret. She no longer appeared in the least uneasy about the danger that Chase might learn of her relationship with me—or that I might learn of her relationship with him. In fact, she acted as if she had never been with Chase, and had almost made me believe she hadn't.

The encounter had left me restless, and, still puzzling over the various uncertainties of the situation, I passed up the hotel dining room and headed for the festive confusion of the streets. There were food stands, and I found myself hungry. I mistrust carnival food, but I let myself go on the sizzling, spicy meats and cakes.

Indians were peddling jewelry of silver and turquoise; there were booths showing pottery and blankets. I made my way among the gaily costumed crowds and came to an open space where Indian dancers were performing to drum beats.

At one point, I looked beyond the dancers and saw Mitchkin standing there alone, watching. Karla and Chase were nowhere in sight when Mitchkin glanced at his watch a moment later and turned toward the hotel.

A sudden nausea seized me. I could not blame it entirely on the food. I began to walk, blindly, pushing my way through the noisy throngs. I was not looking for anyone in particular. . . I knew I would not see her here. But hours later, lying awake in my room, I tried not to let myself think about where she might have spent the evening—and with whom.

Against the one possibility that sickened me, I ranged all the arguments I could think of. Karla had implied that she'd left the brothel, not with Mitchkin, for he seemingly knew nothing of that episode in her life, but by herself—or at any rate, some time after Chase had already left New Orleans.

Her whole attitude toward Chase had indicated dislike and distrust. Her attitude toward Mitchkin had indicated, I thought, a determination to be loyal to him.

If only I knew whether Karla was as straightforward as she appeared—or as skillful a liar as Chase. I might have found out if I had inquired about her sister Paula. The idea had crossed my mind, but I hadn't dared. . . Paula would probably have told her, if they'd

seen each other since, about that ugly little scene in New York; knowing about that, Karla could not have been so sweet to me this evening unless she was the smartest actress I'd ever met.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The dawn came, and flowing gold from the early sun filled my room and shone on the light wood furniture and brilliant rug. I dressed quickly and went for a brisk walk through the plaza and down along the winding Santa Fe river. The mountain air was crisp.

A smoky haze cast a blue veil over the Sangre de Cristos. I could not see Truchas. Mountains always fascinate me.

The bells of St. Francis Cathedral were ringing, and there was a mystical fervor in me as I watched the early churchgoers. A little girl in front of me was tightly holding her Bible and rosary. A little child shall lead them. . . I followed her, and entered the church.

I sat down just inside and took full part in the service. I kneeled and prayed that things might be all right, though I could not have explained my meaning exactly. I felt uplifted, and I really wanted the good to be blessed. As I rose to leave, I caught Karla's profile from the corner of my eye. My excitement of the night before surged up in me, but I forced myself to be calm. She looked incredibly beautiful, even saintly.

Karla was not devout, I knew. Neither was I. Perhaps two such sinners sending their prayers to heaven would do some good. . . I hoped she had not come to church in repentance. Watching her, I willed myself to believe that she had not been with Chase, that she was now an honorable wife—and I sincerely hoped, at that moment, that she would be given the strength to hold to what was right and good.

Going outside before she should see me, I wandered into the Thunderbird, a shop full of lavish gifts, and spent a long time looking at them, trying to select something for Karla that would express my feeling. At last I chose a rosary, with a small medallion of the Madonna.

In the hotel lobby about fifteen minutes to eleven, I was paged; Cyrus Mitchkin wanted to know if I would object to coming up to his suite for our talk.

The door to the suite was open as I came across the thickly carpeted hall from the elevator. I saw Mitchkin bend to light Karla's cigarette. Her orange linen dress was in flaming contrast to the green cover of the couch she sat on, and she looked like some incredibly lovely vision in an artist's mind.

I paused in the doorway and watched as he put his hand to her cheek and she smiled up at him. I coughed to catch their attention, and Mitchkin came forward with hand outstretched.

He offered me a drink, showed me to a chair.

"Now, what is it you wish to see me about, Mr. Heflin?" he asked.

"Business," I said. "I apologize for intruding it on what I now realize is a honeymoon trip."

"That's all right," Karla said, perching on the arm of her husband's chair. "Cyrus adores business." He laughed, and she swung herself up. "I'm going to leave you to discuss your business alone."

I sprang to open the door I had closed behind me, since she seemed headed for the hall. In that brief moment, I slipped the rosary into the flaring pocket of her dress. She was aware of what I had done, and she smiled, her face turned away from her husband.

Back in my chair, I explained my business briefly. Mitchkin looked sincerely regretful.

"Had I met you sooner," he said, "I could have

split the consignment, half for you and half for Mr. Chase. But he arrived early yesterday in a private plane, and I had no idea anyone else wanted the goods so badly. This deal is already closed."

. . . A private plane. . . What kind of inside tip had Chase received that had prompted him to go to that expense to beat me to it? Had Karla tipped him? Or my secretary?

With an effort, I controlled the rage boiling up in me. Mitchkin and I parted amiably. He seemed really distressed at my having missed out on the deal. That feeling would count in my favor the next time he had goods I could use.

That was something for consolation, but certainly I had no desire to remain in La Fonda any longer. Wherever Chase was, there was the old nightmare—closing in on me, threatening to engulf me. I learned I could get a plane out at one. I packed my bag, paid my bill, and handed my key to the desk clerk. I was about to turn away when he called,

"There is a letter for you."

I glanced at it, surprised. When I saw who it was from, I decided to wait until I was well out of the vicinity of my personal hex, Willard Chase, before reading it.

Midway in the plane trip, I read the letter. It was from Karla.

Dear Jack (she had written),

Thank you for the rosary. I've often been sorry I had nothing to remember you by. The rosary is beautiful, but it's the idea of your giving me a rosary that means most. I've begun to go to church again. It reminds me how lucky I am and makes it easier for me to be good.

I wish we'd had more time to talk. You seemed to have some mistaken ideas about me I'd like to have cleared up. I understand what a shock it must have been to you to find Willard Chase there, knowing who

and what he is—or was. I'd like to think he has turned over a new leaf, just as I have, and if so, I can't help but wish him well. Still, I would rather it had been you who got the deal. Anyway, it does no harm for you to get acquainted with Cyrus. I'm sure he will like you, and I'll certainly encourage him to do business with you in the future.

Maybe we'll see each other again, maybe not. But I want you to know that I left the room today because I was afraid I'd throw myself at you if I didn't. I want to be good; I owe it to Cyrus. He's a good, kind man who doesn't ask anything of me but affection, but I promised myself when we married that I would behave. What makes it hard is that I'm young and—well, you knew me, Jack dear. I thought about you last night...

Cyrus wants us to have a baby, and I'm not crazy about the idea of adoption. That makes it tough, but where there's life there's hope! Anyway, I thought you'd be interested in the idea of me as a mother.

No matter what happens, I won't forget New Orleans. Love, Karla.

There was a post script; We're leaving here tomorrow for the Broadmoor and then, in September, we're going to the Mitchkin estate near Banff—Aspenmoor. Remember me always.

I read and reread the letter. It was an invitation, no doubt about it. She remembered our love-making, she wanted me. The deliberate implications were clear, but so was her promise to herself: that she would behave.

I relaxed. The air in the pressurized plane cabin seemed fresh and pure as the stratosphere through which we soared, and I knew why: we'd left Willard Chase far behind, to travel alone, for all I knew or cared, in his private plane. I didn't care where he went or what he did, so long as he stayed away from

me—and from Karla. And her letter convinced me she had kept him away, after all: "I thought about you last night. . ." she'd written. That was good enough for me.

I could join Karla in wishing Chase well, now that he'd seemingly turned over a new leaf as she'd put it, exchanging the life of a high-class pimp for the life of a double-dealing salesman. Sure, I wished him well. It was nothing to me what he did, as long as he did it somewhere else. I'd prefer that he had located in some other town, in some firm other than Mecker's. But at least I didn't have him in my office—and as soon as I got back, I'd make sure there was nobody else in my office who might be connected with Chase.

As for Karla, I was glad she'd thought about me, just as I had thought about her. We could keep on thinking about each other—and that's as far as it would go—and enjoying it, now that I felt sure she was innocent of any involvement with Chase, or with that phoney twin sister of hers.

I destroyed her letter when I had learned it by heart, and found myself feeling more benevolent toward the whole human race than I'd felt in a long, long time.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Miss Hunt was not in the office when I got there. When I called her boardinghouse, the landlady said she had been sick, poor thing, and she didn't think she ought to go back to work for a week, anyway. I still felt she was guilty of telling Chase about Mitchkin, but in my present expansive mood I couldn't stay mad. I sent her some flowers and a Get Well card, and decided not to fire her until she was on her feet again.

I did without a secretary all that week, hunt-and-pecking my own letters and using the telephone instead of the mails whenever possible.

One call I made wasn't business; I got in touch with Deana. The encounter with Karla had set me itching, and I needed someone. Besides, there was just one detail left unsolved in the Karla mystery in my mind, and I thought Deana might have the information I needed.

We went to Deana's apartment after dinner and the theatre. Not until she demanded, irritably, "Okay, baby, tell Dee what's bothering you?" did I realize I had been preoccupied to the point of rudeness all evening.

"Sorry," I mumbled, wondering how to put my questions to her.

She shrugged, then made me a bourbon highball, took cointreau for herself. I remembered having heard that cointreau was a favorite drink with whores.

"How well do you know Sarola Damon?" I began, bluntly.

"I don't know her at all. I just see her around occasionally. Why?"

"Ever see her with any other man besides Lozzati?"

She shook her head. "Not likely to, either,—not while she's alive. He's said to be the jealous type. So?"

When I didn't answer right away, she finished her drink, rose and started for the other room, saying,

"Why don't you quit playing Sam Spade now, baby, and enjoy yourself?"

Good advice, I decided, when she returned wearing a transparent negligee. Her red hair had been brushed out on her shoulders and she was, all in all, a tasty dish.

She sat down on my knee, and I could feel the warmth of her right through the fabric of our garments. I buried my face between her breasts and let nature take its course.

But when I left, earlier than was usual after my

dates with Deana, I apologized for being a grouch and less than an ideal lover.

She patted my face. "Don't let it throw you, Jackie," she said. "Come around again when you've got your troubles off your mind."

At home, I dialed information to see if Sarola had a phone. Sure enough she had one. I went to sleep happy, and dreamed I was Sam Spade, contriving a clever way to reach Sarola without giving Lozzati dangerous ideas.

I woke sweating, and knew I would not sleep again that night. When morning came, I rose and dressed and went to the office. Business was brisk, and demanded my full attention for most of the day.

Sarola's voice was cool and cultured when I spoke to her that afternoon.

"Why do you wish to know?" she said, when I asked her if she had ever known a girl named Karla in New Orleans.

I sought a reply that would assure her that I meant no trouble.

"Because I met her only a short time back, but we didn't get much chance to talk," I said, and added, "She mentioned that you and she wrote to each other occasionally."

That seemed to do it. There was a pause, then Sarola said,

"I'll tell you what. You could come up here for drinks in an hour, if you don't mind a third party. A man I know."

The picture was clear enough. She didn't mind talking to me if Lozzati were there to see that she was being straight about it, and that I didn't make any trouble.

I glanced at my watch, and said I'd be there at five.

Lozzati answered the bell and gave me a quick

once-over before letting me in. He clearly expected me to talk first.

"I'm a friend of Karla's," I said, "and I want to fill in a few facts about her."

"Why?" he asked flatly.

"Not blackmail," I assured him. "It's just that I'm going to be doing business with her husband, and it bothers me to have that big, blank period of time where I don't know what went on. It's none of my business, maybe, but you've probably been curious yourself, one time or another?"

I was sure then that he knew I was in love with Karla, and I think he sympathized with me. He smiled, a surprisingly pleasant smile.

"Sure," he said. "Come on in."

Sarola was wearing a cotton dress; she made it look like royal robes, but it was obviously intended to add to the simple household effect. She had prepared a pitcher of martinis, good and strong, and a plate of canapes which were delicious. She seemed uncertain of how to begin the conversation, but Lozzati was now quite relaxed, so I figured I could go straight to the point.

"Karla was at Fronzeh's with you," I began. "At the time when I met her there, I understand you were good friends."

Sarola shrugged. "We told each other everything, and I liked her a lot, but that don't have to mean anything. Not in a house. After all, who else can you talk to?"

We all laughed a little, and it became easier for me to ask my questions.

"Did she meet Mr.—her husband—in the house?" I knew she hadn't, but it was a way to get started.

"We know who she married," Sarola said.

"Mitchkin," Lozzati put in, making it sound as though they might have had some business dealings over the years.

"No, she didn't meet him there," Sarola said, "and

I don't believe she's ever told him she'd been there. What happened was, she decided to leave the house, right about the time I made up my mind to leave myself. I had met my man." Here Lozzati looked pleased, and they beamed at each other.

That would have been after Sarola dropped Chase—or he dropped her, I reasoned, but I only nodded silently.

"Karla's reason for leaving was different," Sarola went on, then hesitated, as if not sure about explaining.

"You mean, she hadn't met *her* man," I prompted, hoping that was what she did mean. She'd already said Karla hadn't met Mitchkin at the house, but maybe she meant it was another man who had made Karla leave. Chase, maybe. . . I hoped not.

"That's right," Sarola said, apparently making up her mind she could tell me everything. I breathed easier. "Karla left New Orleans by herself, and went to New York. You see, she'd got a letter from her sister." She paused again.

"I knew about her sister," I said.

"That's all right, then. Not many people did, because Karla wanted to keep it a secret. I didn't know but what I was the only one she ever told about this twin sister of hers. Anyway, this letter just about threw Karla—she was all broken up when she showed it to me, and I could see why when I read it. The sister called her a cheat and a lot of other dirty names, and swore she'd never have anything to do with her again."

I winced inwardly and struggled to hide it. Paula must have written that after my visit to her. . .

"Well," Sarola said, "I guess maybe Karla told you how crazy she was about this sister. After getting that letter she took the first plane to New York to see her and try to straighten things out."

"And did she?" I asked.

Sarola shook her head. "The sister wasn't there. Karla never did find her. Instead, she met Mitchkin. She wrote and told me she'd met this rich old man who wanted her, and she was thinking about marrying him. He was nice to her, and he offered her security. I think she felt like he might take the place of her family. She never did stop grieving for her folks, you know, and now it looked like she'd lost her sister too. I answered her letter and told her I was leaving New Orleans with Larry. Her next letter was forwarded here from the house. She was married."

I was feeling good now. So Karla never had seen Paula, and she actually didn't know anything about Paula and me! She really hadn't been putting on any act, then, in La Fonda. I had just one question left to ask, and I was feeling so relieved I got a little reckless.

"But Karla had left New Orleans once before that New York trip, hadn't she?" I asked. Sarola looked blank. "Just about the time Willard Chase left there?" I prompted.

Instantly I regretted my stupidity. Sarola froze. Lozzati was out of his chair, looming over me.

I knew my visit was ended, and I knew, too, that I'd better try to smooth things over before getting out of there.

"Well, that's beside the point," I lied, quickly, pretending not to notice Lozzati's menacing look. "You've told me what I really wanted to know about Karla's marriage, and I'm grateful. I'm glad for her good luck, and believe me, I'll never give away her secret."

I was looking at Sarola as I said it, so she'd know I meant her secret, too -- if it *was* still a secret from Lozzati. Difficult to tell about that, but this wasn't the time or place to take chances. Better just leave it alone.

"We wouldn't either," Lozzati said, meaningfully.

And he walked to the door and opened it for me.

"Thanks," I said, as I went out. "Thanks for everything."

For not beating me up, among other things, I meant. But I wasn't thanking them for telling me what I'd come to find out. Because I was still as much in the dark as before about that episode in Miami. . .

Had Sarola been there, too, but not in view when I happened to see Chase and Karla? That would make Karla's being there okay, from my standpoint—and would account for Sarola's alarm at my mentioning the incident in Lozzati's presence. . .

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was becoming a habit lately—going to the office early because I was wide awake at daybreak after a sleepless night. I told myself it was a good idea to put in a little extra time at the office anyway, since I didn't have my secretary's help; but I wasn't kidding myself much. My nerves were shot, and work was the only way I had of pulling myself together.

This particular morning I arrived without even stopping for breakfast, thinking I'd glance over the morning mail before going out for coffee.

A letter from Karla was right on top. I reached for it at once, leaving the rest of the mail unopened.

Jack dear (she had written),

I didn't receive the letter you sent me (you see, I'm not letting myself believe you didn't write at all), but I got your address from Cyrus. You left your business card with him, remember,

What I'm writing about is this: Cyrus has a warehouse full of sheet metal, I think it is. Anyway, he bought it because it was a bargain, though what he meant to do with it I don't know. Could you sell it? Cyrus hasn't been feeling well lately, and we came

home even quicker than we had planned. I think he'd be glad to have you take this stuff off his hands for just about what he paid or a little more.

He said I could get advice on figures from his office and make the deal, so it might be best if you worked through them. I just wanted you to know, so it could be taken care of faster. He'd feel more at ease.

It's pretty lonely for me here, Jack, but I made a bargain and I'm trying to stick to it. Cyrus keeps telling me to invite young friends, but I don't like many people. I like you, but you don't even write to me.

Love,

Karla

I let the perfume of her writing paper and the assurance that she still thought of me do things to me... Nice things, after a restless night worrying and puzzling over the talk with Sarola. Leaving the letter face up on my desk, I went out to get breakfast, and to savor the pleasant feeling.

Sheet metal. I had more customers for it than dozens of warehouses could hold, and it would bring a good price. I'd have to call Karla to get the specific details she'd deliberately omitted from her letter—and I knew she'd planned it that way. Well, good. I was even looking forward to making the call, and I found myself enjoying breakfast more than I'd enjoyed any meal for some time.

After a leisurely cigarette and second cup of coffee, I went back to the office. Something stopped me as I entered the reception room, and I closed the door behind me quietly and tiptoed in. The something was Midge Hunt's black patent leather purse on her desk, her white gloves beside it. I hadn't expected her to come in today. Where was she now?

The door to my private office was only partly ajar, so I heard her before I saw her. She was using the phone.

"Willard Chase, please...All right, then, tell him

Midge is calling. And tell him it's important."

Her voice sounded shrill and edgy. I moved closer to my office door for a look at her. She was standing beside my desk, her back to me. She held Karla's letter in her hand.

My blood pressure soared, but I controlled the impulse to burst in on her, and listened a little longer.

"But he's got to talk to me!" she was saying, apparently to some clerk or switchboard operator at Chase's residence, since it was too early, I thought, for him to be at his office. "Tell him it's business. I know he'll talk to me if you tell him it's about the Mitchkin business!" Rising hysteria choked her. The hand holding the letter trembled.

A long pause while I waited and Midge sniffled back a deluge of tears, which poured unchecked when she spoke again.

"Will? Oh, Will, how can you do this to me? You wouldn't even talk to me till you found out I had something to tell you about business...Yes, Mitchkin...Of course I'm sure, I've got the letter right here...When can I see you, Will? Please, will you see me if I tell you about the letter?"

I walked in, then. She was listening so intently she was not even aware of me until I walked around the desk to confront her. Roughly I took the phone from her hand and replaced it in its cradle, breaking the connection. The letter fluttered from her other hand and I seized it.

"Mr. Heflin—" she sobbed. She looked awful, white and drawn with dark circles under her weeping eyes.

"You're fired," I said flatly. "No notice, no bonus, no nothing. This isn't the first spying you've done for your boyfriend, but it's the last you'll do from this office. So just clear out anything that belongs to you."

She leaned against my desk, her hands covering her face and shaking.

"There are other jobs," I said. "If you get one where you can't do the boss dirt to help Chase, I'll even write a reference saying your office work is o-kay."

She did not look up.

"Well, what do you expect me to do? Act as though nothing has happened, and let the two of you wreck my business?"

Now she raised her streaked, distorted face. "I can't get another job," she said. "I'm sick."

"You'll get over the virus," I said. "You must have a few bucks saved to tide you over."

She gulped and shook her head, and with a wave of revulsion I knew where her dough had gone. Anger boiled in me.

"Well, get it back from him!" I snarled. "He made a pile out of the first Mitchkin deal you gave him, and half of it belongs to you!"

Slumping as if in pain, she crept from my office. I heard soft movements in the reception room, desk drawers opened and closed, and then there was the sound of the door. When I peeked out, she was gone.

My nerves were shot for the morning, and I went to a bar and drank, trying to get the unpleasant scene out of my mind. It was late in the afternoon before I phoned Karla.

The connection was made rapidly, and then her warm, teasing voice came to me. My pulses hammered.

"Jack dear," she said. "I was sure you'd phone."

Damned right she was sure. "How are you, Karla? How is your husband feeling?"

"Cy isn't doing so well," she said sadly. "The altitude bothered him while we were away, and I thought surely he'd feel better at home. But it's his heart, and the doctor says that all we can do is see that he rests, and eats sensibly, and isn't worried."

"I'm sorry," I said, and I was.

She chattered for a while about how lovely the es-

rate was and how much Cyrus would enjoy seeing me, but we eventually got down to business.

Just before we said goodbye, Karla dropped her voice and murmured, "I think about New Orleans." It was the kind of statement which, to someone who might be listening in, would just be a confession of homesickness, but to me it was like a kiss—one of Karla's special kisses.

The next few days were busy with phone calls and arrangements. So many of my customers wanted the sheet metal that I had to dole it out; it was a big favor on my part to sell it, and I let the buyers know it.

When the last of it was dealt out, I felt in the mood for entertainment and called Deana.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

"Ouch!"

"Well, I'm not in the mood for a date," she sulked.

"Ah, snap out of it, baby," I coaxed. "I'm flush, the evening is young, and you can pick your spots."

"What if I want to go straight home afterward—alone?"

"I'll be sad, but I'll understand. Fair enough?"

She laughed grudgingly. "Fair enough."

When I picked her up, she seemed to have gotten over her mood. She was wearing a green wool suit and carrying a leopard-skin muff. I realized that we were well into autumn.

"Where to, ma'am?" I asked when she was in the car.

"Carter's," she said.

Carter's was a staid, middle-class restaurant with solid food and no dancing. I would have enjoyed something gayer, but I did not want to argue.

It was a trifle past the usual dinner hour for sober society, but there were several parties in the place having their coffee and dessert.

We ordered drinks and dinner, and looked around while waiting for them, conversing briefly about dentistry and a couple of new patients who were getting extensive work done, a choice of uninteresting movies in town for people like us who had no special plans for the evening, and a marvelous ranch mink coat being shown in a shop window Deana passed every day. It wasn't terribly gay, but at least she wasn't snapping at me.

There was laughter from a table across the room, and we looked in that direction. Reverend Browning was there, his head tipped back, his face red from his laughter.

"Somebody must have told him a nifty," I said.

"Who?" Deana asked wryly, and I had to admit the table was not full of jokers.

Mrs. Browning was lean and dour, a proper lady in black. Seated next to her was a pale young man in an oxford grey suit, a polite smile on his face. The fourth party was a girl of about twenty-five. She was wearing a navy-blue suit, carefully unfeminine, a hat that did nothing for her undistinguished features, and no make-up.

"He must have told the joke himself," I decided. "Who's the girl. I've seen the Brownings from a distance once or twice, but not the others."

"Miss Browning," Deana said. "Her name is Beth and she had buck teeth until Doc took care of them. Cost a fortune."

"And the fourth, I take it, is her beau."

Deana shrugged. "Him I don't know. It isn't easy for a man to be friends with a minister's daughter—especially a minister like Browning, full of ideas about lipstick being sinful."

"I'd think that kind of girl would be a cinch; she's probably scared to death of being an old maid."

"She's no cinch," Deana said firmly. "I talk to her when she comes in for a check-up, and she's not to be

had."

I decided to bait her. "Maybe the right man hasn't tried."

"You, I suppose?" she said scornfully.

"Well, me, for instance."

"Would you like to make a sizable bet?"

"Hey, now, I thought this was for laughs."

Deana's lip curled. "Men," she said. "They talk so big."

I was nettled briefly, but I still found the whole situation funny. "How much?"

She thought it over for no more than a second. "That mink?"

I winced. "What happens if you lose? I don't want a mink."

"It costs only twenty-five hundred, and I've got that much in my account. I'm so sure you can't make Beth Browning, I'll put the cash against the coat."

"Suppose I do make her—will you take my word for it?"

She looked into my eyes.

"Sometimes you get me sore," she said. "But I'll trust you in this. Your word will be good enough."

We shook hands on it.

As the Browning party left, the minister called a greeting. Mrs. Browning ducked her head and gave what must have been intended as a smile, and Beth stopped by our table. Deana made the introduction and Beth acknowledged it by bobbing her head and blushing a little.

"You know," I said after she had walked out of the restaurant, "she's not bad, close up. That delicate skin and fair hair, and eyes like a kid."

"That's right, get yourself whipped up," Deana said, and there was real anger in her voice.

"What's the matter with you? I swear I haven't done a thing but try to please you, and you're jumpy as a cat on coals. Is there something I did that I don't re-

member?"

She glared at me.

"It's what you don't do. You hardly ever call me, and when you do it's at the last minute. When we're together you—" she fumbled for an example—"you're not really there. I thought it might be another girl. I could understand that. But I don't see you around with anyone, and nobody else does either—I've asked around—and besides, I don't think you're the type to fall in love."

"You're right about that," I said, anxious to soothe her temper. "I'm not the type to fall in love."

"That's what makes me so sore. You don't have any reason for being so damned—casual toward me. It's just that I bore you! And I don't mind saying it makes me sick! You're no better than I am. If I'm small-time, so are you. That's why I don't think you can make Beth Browning. Maybe she's plain and not getting any younger, but she's a lady!"

I opened my mouth to protest, but saw it was no use. I nodded silent agreement to her demand that I take her home, paid the check, and walked with her out to my car.

I tried, when we parked before her door, to tell her that I didn't feel superior to her—that she was my type of girl, we lived by much the same standards... She cut me short with a weary shake of the head, and said goodnight.

I drove home, deep in thought. Where had she got that fantastic idea that I considered myself better than her? Why, I didn't even feel superior to Karla, who had been a prostitute.

Karla. I'd learned, by now, that I must not let myself think of her. It was torture to remember her—but so was the effort to forget.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I went to church that Sunday. I was determined to win that bet, not so much to show Deana as to prove something to myself. After the service, I waited to say a few words to Reverend Browning. The sermon had been routine, its humor corny and its message predictable, but as we shook hands I told him I had enjoyed it immensely.

"Thank you very much," he said. "I'm especially glad to know my little talk has reached a newcomer, and I want to welcome you to our church. I do hope you'll be joining our socials. You'd be a fine addition to the group, and I believe you'd find the get-togethers enjoyable. . . . But here, Beth could explain it better than I. She is secretary."

Beth had come up beside us, and now her father asked my name so he could perform the introduction.

"Mr. Heflin and I have met, father," she said. "A mutual friend introduced us."

"Yes, of course!" I said. "It was at Carter's. I didn't connect the names. How silly of me."

"Not at all, not at all," Browning boomed. "It's not an unusual name."

Fifteen minutes later, Beth and I were strolling through the park while she tried to interest me in the group. It was cool out and rather windy and her cheeks became pink. I might not find this a dull experience at all.

"We do all the modern dances," she said, "just so they're not—you know, improper."

"The tango?" I suggested.

"Oh yes, we do that, and the mambo, and even the jitterbug, although there's none of that throwing up in air stuff. Members of the group bring their own records."

I let the silence go on for a while. I could see it made her uncomfortable, self-conscious.

Finally I said, "What other activities are there?"

"Picnics in the summer, hikes, theatre parties if the play's all right—"

"You probably don't have any time to yourself, then."

"Oh yes I do," she said softly.

I began to feel hopeful.

"How do you spend it?"

"Reading, helping my mother with the house, seeing friends."

We turned back toward her home. A gust caught at her hat and she took it off. Her hair was like pale wheat and the wind brushed strands of it across her face.

"I hope you won't think me bold, but I'd appreciate it if you'd consider me a candidate for friendship."

"Why, I'd be glad to, Mr. Heflin." She blushed.

We agreed that I would try to make one of the group meetings soon, or, if not free for any of their scheduled activities (and I promised myself I would not be), I should at least call at the Browning home—any time.

It was left at that, and I felt I'd made fair progress.

I waited until Friday before calling on the Brownings. It was good tactics to let a girl expect a visitor who didn't come.

Beth opened the door, and there was no mistaking the look of pleasure on her face.

"Oh, I'm glad you could make it. Do come in!"

Her parents were both in the living room, her mother reading, her father sitting over a chess board where a problem was set up.

"Do you play chess?" the reverend asked as we shook hands.

"No, I'm sorry to say. It always seemed beyond me, intellectually."

"Oh, but you're wrong! It isn't difficult at all, and

it is most absorbing."

"I'm sure it is, but it just isn't in my line."

"If you were to try—"

Mrs. Browning spoke up,

"Don't nag at him, Paul. Lots of people don't like games."

Reverend Browning looked so deflated that I almost wished I could let him talk me into a game. But I had other business to attend to.

"Is there anything doing this evening that I could join?" I asked, hoping there wasn't.

"No, there isn't," Mrs. Browning said.

"I'm going to a class," Beth said, indicating her coat thrown over a chair, a text and a notebook next to it.

"Well, then, I'll walk you over to it, if that's all right with your folks."

They indicated that it was, and we started out.

"What sort of class is it?" I asked as we walked toward the college.

"Missions," she said. "I'm going to be a missionary." I must have paled perceptibly, thinking of that mink coat. "Does that surprise you?"

"It does, rather," I said. "You're young and pretty, and being a missionary—well—"

"It's not like entering a convent, you know."

"There's that," I admitted. "Do you find male missionaries appealing?" I'd have to speed this process if I was to stand any chance at all.

She giggled. "Not as a group of eligible males, perhaps, but you don't marry a group—and many of them are just like other people."

I sighed. "Counted out before I even propose."

I could see her smile in the dusk, but she said nothing until we were at the entrance to the college. Then she looked up at me.

"You don't really want to join our social group, do you?"

"No. I wanted to know you better and it seemed a good approach. Do you mind?"

"It's flattering. But I'm serious about being a missionary."

"So be it. May I wait for you and walk you home, We could stop somewhere for coffee."

"All right...Visitors are permitted if they sit in the back of the classroom and keep very, very quiet."

"You've talked me into it." Maybe that would convince her of my sincerity.

I did not try to concentrate on the lecture; the students themselves fascinated me. Did they all want to be missionaries? Some of the girls were downright lovely, and many of the men were rugged specimens.

Later, we walked out into the dramatically windy night, and as I watched Beth tie her scarf around her hair, I found myself more excited than I had been since seeing Karla again. There was something different about Beth. Most of my girls had been beauties; she wasn't even pretty, but her plainness had a quality that drew me.

"Why not come to my house?" Beth suggested, when the first coffee shop we passed turned out to be closed. "I can make some for both of us."

There was a light in the hall when we arrived, but the rest of the house was dark. I followed Beth through the dim rooms to the back of the house. She snapped on the light and revealed a gleaming, modern kitchen.

While she put up the coffee and brought out half a pie, some crackers and a box of doughnuts, we talked about her future as a missionary. She sounded enthusiastic, but I could not be sold.

"Good works are for plain women," I said.

"I'm plain."

"Let me judge that. You're not."

She was standing beside me, having just set my

place at the table. "Are you a good judge?"

"A very good judge," I said huskily, and put my arm around her. She stepped away as though coincidentally, and went for the coffee.

"Men are afraid of ministers' daughters," she said, "unless they are men who put worth above glamor. I don't think *you* do."

"Yet I'm not afraid of you," I said, and let it go at that until we had finished our coffee.

We made our way back through the dark rooms, and I waited until we reached the living room before stopping her.

"Don't move," I whispered, slipping my arms around her as I stood in back of her.

She went rigid but made no sound, and when I turned her toward me she did not struggle. I pressed her to me and I could smell her clean, unperfumed hair, feel her small breasts through my shirt.

I kissed her cheek and let my lips slide to her mouth. She did not kiss back, but her lips trembled. I ran my hands up her back, pulling her still closer, feeling her begin to shake.

"I'm not afraid of you," I whispered.

Suddenly she began to kiss back, and her shaking and trembling increased.

"Nor am I afraid of you!" she whispered. "You can't mean this, though. You must be just playing with me!"

"I don't know," I returned her whisper, not wanting to assure her of what I didn't believe myself. "It's now...Now that I want you!"

I felt her urge me to move, and there was a definite downward tug from her, and I found that we were sinking to the cushioned divan in their living room. There was wild excitement now in Beth; the kind that sends itself through a man, only to make him savage. But I refrained from demonstrating openly, without thought that she'd become the aggressor.

We were merely sitting now, Beth's arms clinging around me. I felt our thighs touching, and one of her breasts nestled against my chest. Her left arm dropped from its hold and her hand touched my thigh tenderly, sending through me a mighty shock, along with a thrill. Without delay she became somewhat professional, and my sexual weakness betrayed itself to her hand as she moved it to the most sensitive part of my being.

It was I who was being made! She was lying back, taking me with her, and I was forced to shuffle my body to land prone over her. I knew her arm had gone into a crotch about my neck, as I could feel the pressure of it, along with her strong desire to feel me in her. I became afraid that someone might come in, yet I was conscious that her skirt was slipping upward, its grip moving the skin of my leg as she pulled it.

The heat and looseness of her was ungratifying. She was biting my cheek, my lips, and once her nails dug deeply into my flesh. Mutual satisfaction was reached simultaneously and we lay limp, Beth's panting breath hot around my neck.

"We shouldn't have!" she whispered. "I never..."

"This is your first time?" I said, feeling that it was what she had intended saying.

"Yes. We shouldn't have!"

With disgust I gained my footing and straightened myself, while she rose and covered her legs by pulling down her garment. There was a rustle from some part of the house and she whispered,

"Hurry and go! They mustn't find us like this!"

She ran then. I could hear her footsteps on the stairs to the second story, and then a door closed behind her. I was in a state of fright at being left there alone, and under my breath I swore furiously as I made my way through the room, found my coat in the hall, and let myself out.

The cool air reminded me that I had made a bet. Factually I'd won. But could I really tell Deana that

I'd won? Could I tell her that a minister's daughter had seduced me in the dark seclusion of her home? No. I couldn't tell Deana that. I would have to call off the bet, tell her something about ethics or whatever. But at the same time I knew that I couldn't see Beth again.

Whistling, I turned in the direction of Deana's apartment. It might cost me the coat, but I knew I would not tell her that I had made Beth Browning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Deana was in bed when I rang the bell. She had never given me a key to her apartment; I don't think any man had one, because she was proud of paying her own rent and having no master. I doubt if she ever took money from a man, either, except by winning a bet from him. Gifts were different, and she would quite casually mention something she'd like to own, knowing her escort of the evening would make a point of buying it for her. I know she had a couple of charge accounts, and the stores did not send the bills to her.

She came to the door barefoot and clearly prepared for a quiet night alone. Her hair was in curlers and her skin shone faintly from creaming. I recognized her nightgown; it was one I had bought for her for some occasion months ago.

"Hello, baby," I said, delighted to find her home.

"Oh." She turned away from the door and I followed her into the apartment, shutting the door behind me. She walked on into the bedroom and climbed into bed. I trailed her and sat on the pink slipper chair beside the bed.

"You could have called," she said. "I wasn't expecting company." She indicated her hair curlers, her skin, and reached for a paper tissue.

She took the cream off her face and discarded the

crumpled tissue. Now she lit a cigarette and settled back against her pillow.

"Was there something special?"

I took my time, wondering just how to put it, and she waited, her eyes on me.

"Well," I said at last, "I'm not quite happy about this bet."

She crinkled her nose. "I'll bet."

"No, really. I've made quite a bit of progress—been invited to her house, discussed love, gotten considerably past first base—" Deana looked surprised—"and I find I don't want to go any further."

Deana raised her eyebrows. "Halitosis?"

"I'm not kidding," I said, a trifle nettled. "She's a nice girl, and it wouldn't be hard to make her. But I've got a conscience—yes—and I'd rather not be the first man in her life."

"So?"

"So I want to call off the bet."

Deana squashed her cigarette with slow deliberation. She settled deeper against her pillows, raised her hands and crossed them behind her head. She looked up at the ceiling, whistling softly. Then she looked at me, smiled, and put her tongue in her cheek. I controlled my irritation and waited.

Finally she sighed deeply.

"Would you like to know my reaction to your proposition, friend," she asked.

"Of course," I said. "Don't make a production of it."

She extracted another cigarette from a battered pack, straightened it out, moistened the tip, looked around for matches and registered irritation when she couldn't find them, rejected the matchbook I offered, and then found her own. By the time she lit up and was reclining back on her pillows again, I could have strangled her.

"Crap," she said.

I was really startled.

"What!"

"I said crap. That's my reaction."

"It doesn't make sense."

"No? It makes this sense. A bet's a bet. You bet you could make Beth Browning, and I bet you couldn't. You can't, so I win."

"What do you mean, I *can't*. I've just explained that I can, that I was well on the way. I'm backing out because I'm not a heel, though apparently you don't understand that. I don't want to go on with this because this girl isn't just a roll in the hay."

"Like me."

"That's not what I said."

"It's what you meant. If the bet was on me, you'd go through with it gladly. I am just a roll in the hay. Not Beth, though. She's a buck-toothed lady, too pure for the likes of you. She brings out your chivalry and nobility, so I'm out a mink coat. Hell, no!" She was leaning forward now, her face flushed with anger.

I hadn't expected anything this violent from her. There was no doubt she was seriously offended.

"Shh-hh," I said. "You're getting upset about nothing. If the bet was on you—and I'd never have made a bet on a friend, I might say—I'd go through with it gladly because it would be a pleasure. You're somebody worth having, hair-curlers and all. Beth—" I flipped my hand and shrugged, to show my indifference. "She doesn't excite me."

Deana laughed bitterly, but she leaned back.

"You must think I'm a real dope," she said. "I know Beth's no ball of fire. She runs cold for layers down. That's why I didn't think you could make her—and still don't."

She puffed on her cigarette and watched me. She was trying to insult me, and I wasn't going to let her see she could.

"You'll have to take my word for what happened to—

night. All I can tell you is that if I had wanted to work at it a little, she'd have keeled over. She dated me, she brought me into the house after everyone was asleep, she let me touch her—and I do mean touch. We kissed—what do you want, a play by play account? I just decided the whole thing was a mistake."

"You're a liar."

Suddenly I was furious, and it was taking all my effort not to show it.

"You're a liar," she repeated. "Maybe everything happened the way you say, but it wasn't you who called it off. You came here panting. Good old Deana would take care of you. You weren't a man who had coolly decided you didn't want a girl who was willing. Beth isn't any love goddess, maybe, but she's young and she's not revolting. And you aren't the gentleman you make out. For all I know, she's just your type, maybe, chilly outside, inexperienced...All I know is you were ready, and if Beth hadn't chucked you out, you'd be in the hay with her right now!"

She was kneeling in bed. The gown did nothing to hide her body; it was held on by narrow ribbons at the shoulders, and the lace at its top barely hid her nipples. The gown itself was of pink chiffon, faded now almost the color of her body, and through it I could see all of her.

There was no beauty in her face. Anger had made it hard. Her eyes were narrowed, and as she spat her words at me her head bobbed, and the little sausage curls jiggled. But her breasts joggled, too, and as she kneeled the chiffon was pulled tight across her thighs.

"Well, say something!" she demanded. "You know damned well I've got it right. You tried to step out of your class and you were slapped down. You think you're so much—so ethical, so decent, so far above the heels. Well, you were fun once, we did it for laughs. Then all of a sudden you were taking yourself awfully seriously. I thought maybe you fell in love,

but then I knew that couldn't be. You're in love with good old Jack Heflin, gentleman bachelor. . . You make Beth? Hah! She probably slapped your face and told you to get back to your side of the tracks!"

I slapped her, hard. She made an involuntary sound, and we stayed like that for a long minute. She had her hand half-lifted to her face, and her cheek was bright red where my palm had hit. I stood over her, my hand still up. We stared at each other, and she knew what was going to happen, because her first move was to sink back on her heels and whimper.

"No, Jack. No. Don't."

But it was too late for that. I could have slapped her silly for what she had said—but I had decided to take her instead, I can't be sorry for what happened, even though I had never before been so brutal nor wanted to be.

It was an attack. She fought me at first, bringing up her knees, clawing at my face, trying to fight her way out of the bed. But I am a big man; even if she had been a strong, athletic woman, she wouldn't have had a chance. As it was, her desperate struggles were futile. They merely inflamed me more.

I made no effort to rouse her, nor, later, to satisfy her. I held her wrists so hard that they must have been bruised for days afterward; my body was a weapon against her.

At some point she stopped fighting, and some of the excitement went out of it for me. She must have realized that, for she made no motion at all from that moment on, and when I had finally spent my rage and my desire, she was still lying on the bed as though dead.

I could hear her breathing, though, so I did not bother to look at her to see if she was seriously hurt. I went into the living room arranging my clothing, made a drink for myself, and then drank it slowly. There was no movement in the bedroom.

When I had finished the drink I pulled the chair over

to the coffee table and took out my checkbook and a pen.

Deana didn't take money from men, but she'd sure as hell take this. I laughed, feeling better than I had for quite a while as I made out the check.

I looked around at the apartment before I left, knowing I would not be seeing it again. There were lots of gimcracks around—novelty dolls, ashtrays taken from various night spots, stuff like that. I took the biggest ashtray there to weight down the check. I wanted Deana to have the coat.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My new secretary was efficient and wrapped up in her own affairs. As a matter of fact one of my good customers, Tom Cottingham, suggested that I hire someone more—available. Apparently he had tried a pass and had it thrown back in his face, an experience certainly not novel to Tom, since his appearance was far from prepossessing, being undersized, with one eye that twisted up at an angle at variance with the other giving him a disconcertingly lopsided look. But slapping down passes was obviously nothing new to Jones (as she liked to be called) either; and I felt pretty sure that if Willard Chase ever did dare show up in my office again, he wouldn't get anywhere with her.

I certainly hoped she was as dependable as she seemed, because in the next few weeks business took me out of town on a number of trips, and I wanted very much to feel that office matters were safe with Jones. Chase was still Marty's fair-haired boy, securely established in Meeker's firm, and still, therefore, a threat to me. But over a period of time none of my deals went mysteriously astray as they had while Midge Hunt was working for me, and I began to feel

I could trust Jones to remain loyal even under the the pressure of Chase's hypnotic charms, should he ever try exerting them on her.

She was brunette, tall and striking, intelligent, in her late twenties. Men were no strangers to her, I was sure, and her head would not be easily turned by the sort of line Chase handed out. So long as she was reliable, I was glad that business made it necessary for me to do a little travelling, because I was feeling increasingly restless. . . It seemed to me my nerves were going to pieces—had been, steadily, ever since Chase first came to town, or maybe since before that. Since I'd first met Karla.

Jones had an opportunity, when I returned from one particularly extensive trip that had kept me away for ten days, to give me the reassurance I hadn't felt I should ask her for. In going over with me the list of messages she'd taken for me during my absence, she pointed out that Marty Meeker had telephoned twice, and went on through the other names quickly until she came to one she had jotted down simply as "Chase." She hesitated, as if trying to decide what to tell me about that one.

"Mr. Chase dropped in personally, here at the office," she said at last, "without phoning to see if you were in—which surprised me since he said he was with Meeker—and Mr. Meeker knew you were away." It didn't surprise me, though, and I all but held my breath.

"What did Mr. Chase want?" I asked.

"He never made that quite clear; said he just happened to be passing by, and dropped in to say hello."

I grunted, and decided to go for all or nothing.

"How did you size him up, Jones? Give me your frank opinion."

She gazed at me levelly as if to ascertain just how frank I wanted her to be. There was no evasiveness in her dark brown eyes, and suddenly she smiled

broadly, apparently sure that I meant what I said and she could speak freely.

"I'd say he was a fast-talker, too attractive for anyone's good. He's selfish and—I hope you won't mind my saying this—I don't think he's honest."

I looked at her with open admiration.

"That's splendid observation—and so accurate I'm amazed you could see all that on your first impression."

She turned pink.

"It wouldn't be fair to let you think I'm so smart," she said. "It isn't a first impression. A couple of weeks ago he came to my table when I was having lunch, introduced himself and sat down. I didn't invite him, but I couldn't very well make a scene."

I nodded understandingly. "And then?"

"Well—" Her rather wide mouth quirked at the corners in a faintly ironic smile. "He started to talk a lot of flattering nonsense and finally got around to what he wanted."

"Which was?"

"Which was for me to let him know if anything interesting happened in the business. Oh, he didn't say I was to spy, or anything; he said you were friends and he'd always like to give you a helping hand if he could."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"For all I knew, you really were friends, as he said, and I didn't want to make trouble. And since I had no intention of calling him up or ever seeing him again if I could help it, there just didn't seem to be any point. But now that you've asked me, I'm glad to get it off my chest."

"Good girl. He isn't my friend, for the record, and he's serious trouble for any girl who gets mixed up with him. I'd toss him out on his ear the next time he showed up in this office, if he weren't working for a competitor who happens also to be an old friend."

It means a lot to me to know you're capable of handling him."

I went into my own office to look over the stack of mail that had been accumulating while I was away, but before sitting down at my desk to glance through it, I stuck my head back out the door, as an afterthought, to tell Jones just how much it meant to me.

She thanked me for the raise, which I told her would be included in her next check, but made no demonstration about it. You had to respect her.

Then sorting through my mail with one hand, I picked up the phone on my desk and asked Jones to get me Meeker. He came on the line just as I turned over a slim, faintly scented envelope with the return address: K. Mitchkin, Aspenmoor, Banff, Canada. . . The sight of her clear, slanting handwriting set my pulse pounding, tightened my nerves. I'd been about to make a date with Marty for drinks or dinner, but now I just said,

"Wanted to return your call, Marty. How're things?"

I only half-listened to him. He said something about getting together.

"Sure," I said. "Let's do that. . . No, I couldn't say just when. I just got off the plane an hour ago, Marty. What do you say we check later in the week? Right. . ." I half-listened a minute longer. He had nothing special on his mind. I asked him to give my regards to Mrs. Meeker, to take care of himself, and ended the call as quickly as I politely could.

Then I read Karla's letter. It was cryptically affectionate and provocative as always, between the lines. She reported that Cyrus had liked my handling of the last deal and wished I would get in touch with his office about something else. . . She made it clear that Mitchkin really wasn't well, and while this news thrilled me with the prospect of Karla being a widow soon and free of her vows, it saddened me a little too. This was a decent and pleasant man who had for some reason—undoubtedly Karla's influence—decided to

favor me. He had been fine to her too. When he died—and, even if he hadn't been sick the odds were on his dying within the next few years—a good influence would be gone from her life, a valuable friend from mine.

When Karla was free again. . . I let my imagination play with the thought. The first thing I did would be put a question or two to her, straight out, with no beating around the bush—the questions for which I'd tried indirectly to get the right answers from Sarola. There was some innocent explanation for that incident in Miami, I was sure of it. For example, maybe Karla and Sarola had gone down for the races together, just the two of them, and Chase had followed them there. Or possibly Karla had gone alone, or even with another man, and just happened to run into Chase by coincidence, and at the moment when I'd seen her with him she was perhaps giving him some message for Sarola, or something.

None of these possibilities sounded too reasonable, I had to admit. But I was sure enough that there was some perfectly innocent explanation of Karla's being there with Chase that I cursed myself a thousand times for having jumped to the conclusion I had. If I'd taken the trouble to check on it, Karla could have been mine long ago, instead of Mitchkin's wife. . . Next time I had the chance, I promised myself, I'd get the truth from Karla herself.

Meantime, this letter from her made it very clear that I was to contact Mitchkin's office, instead of telephoning her personally. I did, that same day, and found myself on to another lucrative proposition.

Cyrus had whimsically bought several lots of goods at an auction; he didn't know just what he had bought or what should be done with it, and he had—through Karla—directed his office to put matters in my hands. I was given the necessary documents; everything was above-board. Mitchkin wanted a certain percentage

on the deal as a whole, and whatever I got out of it above that was mine, plus his gratitude for my handling the whole shooting match.

That kind of deal has many angles, and it can be lousy for the guy in my position. For instance, if the property wasn't worth what the purchaser paid, and there are no buyers, or only buyers willing to pay a minimum, I'd find myself doing a lot of work for no dough. Cyrus's percentage had to come first, and if nothing was left—well, that would be my share.

But Cyrus's "whims" must have been based on sound tips or fantastic luck, or both; what he bought was worth a lot more than he'd paid for it, and after his share was paid there was plenty for me.

I answered Karla's letter, thanking her for putting me onto the deal and telling her how well it had shaped up. Naturally she replied, and so now our correspondence became fairly regular. For the most part it was the kind of mail anyone could have read, and not infrequently a letter from her was a business tip which sent me into a new bustle of remunerative activity.

Sometimes, though, there'd be a sentence or a paragraph that seemed to slip from her pen unawares. I'd find myself reading words that sent my senses reeling, my blood throbbing. Karla was not finding it easy to be a demure, faithful wife to a man who could mean nothing to her physically. She remembered our days together as vividly as I did, and when she let herself think about them the excitement in her would flow with the ink, and come over the miles to me.

I put down one such letter with hands trembling. It had been too long since I had been with a woman. Deana was part of the past, and I was glad I hadn't gone back to Beth Browning. But, wrapped up in business and emotionally disturbed over the events of the past few months, I had not bothered to make new contacts or keep up the old ones.

Time to throw out my little black book and start a new one, I decided. Meantime, I had better take care of some of the social obligations I had been neglecting.

I telephoned Marty to ask him to lunch.

He was tied up for lunch, he said, with such genuine regret in his voice that I let him talk me into having dinner at his home that night.

"But I don't like to go barging in on the little woman," I protested.

"My little woman is not like other little women. Besides which she doesn't do the cooking, so what does she care?"

Happily he overrode my objections, and said he would pick me up at four-thirty, to beat the traffic.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

This particular evening Marty and I had arranged for him to pick me up for dinner at his home. Mrs. Meeker was delighted to see me, she said, and she acted as though it were true. She was a rather motherly woman, probably bored with her days now that the family was grown and away. There was no doubt she and Marty were fond of each other. It wasn't the kind of relationship I could imagine for myself, but I could see that some people managed to be happy with no kicks, no excitement.

A houseman served drinks before a roaring blaze in the fireplace of the well-upholstered Meeker living room. The drinks were good, and I felt my nerves beginning to purr.

The Meekers were discussing trivia of their day—a letter from Martin, new pictures of a grandchild, what the doctor had said about Marty taking a vacation during the worst part of the winter. I liked their talking with me there; it made me part of the family.

"But I told Willie six o'clock," Mrs. Meeker said. My nerves stopped purring.

"Willard Chase?" I asked.

"He drops in now and then," Marty said. "Mama—" here he nodded toward his wife—"asked him to come for dinner when he called her today."

I smiled and nodded, though I felt like snarling. After all, it was their house and their food. . .

"He says he likes to feel he has a home," Mrs. Meeker said, placidly, "and someone who cares for him in it. And we're glad to have him, as often as he can come. He's a lonely boy, underneath that wonderful smile."

Oh, brother! I looked at her hard, but if all this maternal gush was covering some kind of hanky-panky, she was a better actress than Hayes. No, this woman, perhaps ten years older than Chase, was delighted with the role he had given her—mother, or anyhow big sister, first in the heart of a lonely boy.

My horrified thoughts apparently showed, despite my effort to conceal them, for Mrs. Meeker gazed at me from under arched brows, with some irritation.

"You and Willie are friends, aren't you?" she demanded.

I squirmed. It would choke me to say yes for politeness' sake.

Marty came to my rescue.

"I'm sure there are really no hard feelings, Mama," he said, placatingly, "but Jack no doubt feels Willie had something to do with Midge Hunt quitting her job like she did, without giving notice or anything."

Mrs. Meeker sniffed.

"He was too good for her. What more could an honest man do than tell a girl he didn't want her to waste her time on him? But she phoned him again and again, nagged him, cried—believe me, he suffered."

This was getting up to my neck. In telling his own version of the Midge Hunt thing, Willie-boy had obviously laid it on with a shovel.

Fortunately, dinner was announced, and Marty said he was hungry, Willie or no Willie. Mrs. Meeker gave instructions to the maid about keeping stuff warm for him, just in case he did decide to show up.

During dinner, which was delicious and not for dieters, we talked about new shows in town, a certain night club act everyone was talking about, and the comparative charms of Haiti and Puerto Rico for Marty's projected winter vacation.

The dessert was a chocolate whipped cream roll.

"Marty shouldn't eat it," Mrs. Meeker said, "but Willie loves it."

Marty did not look sore at this, and I could understand when the maid brought in the special dessert Mrs. Meeker had made for Marty, something involving strawberries and wine.

No, no matter how you figured it, Mrs. Meeker did not feel any disloyalty to Marty in her motherly fussing over Chase, and the idea that there was disloyalty in it had not occurred to Marty. Still, the situation worried me. These two good people certainly did not know what sort of man they were getting mixed up with—and in their innocence, they were almost sure to get hurt. They ought to be warned, I thought. . . But I hated to be the one to warn them. Solidly entrenched in their affections as Chase was, my warning might have no effect other than to make them dislike me. And I did not want to lose their friendship after all these years, over a rat like Chase.

I was still debating it in my mind when Marty invited me to join him before the fireplace again, and Mrs. Meeker went to get her coat.

"She belongs to a book club," Marty explained. "They all get the same book every month and then get together to discuss it. They have lecturers and all—you know. Keeps her busy."

She came in to say goodnight to me because I had said I'd probably leave before she got back.

"One more thing, Mr. Heflin," she said, "about Willie. He doesn't care who a person is, if he likes them. Only last week I heard from someone he was seen in a nightclub with a colored girl. Maybe you think it was none of my business, but I feel as though he were a member of my family. I mentioned it to him. Do you know what he said? 'I like her, Mom; she's a good girl no matter what they say.' Well, I've found out since that she is some gangster's sweetheart and I'm going to talk to Willie again, I know he only wants to be kind to the girl; you can imagine how many friends she has, a colored girl hanging out with white people, and with a gangster boyfriend. But Willie hasn't a cowardly bone in his body. He says he is just being kind to her, and I believe him, but I'm going to warn him anyway. Don't you think I'm right?"

"Mrs. Meeker, any man is lucky to have you looking out for his interests," I said, feeling helpless.

She beamed, and told me she had been delighted that I came for dinner, and I must come again soon. I said I would.

Marty and I sat before the fire in silence, sipping brandy and puffing cigars.

At last I made up my mind. For whatever it was worth, I began,

"Ever happen to run over in your mind the names of all the colored girls in town who go to the expensive night spots and have gangster boyfriends?"

Marty nodded, grimacing "Sarola Damon. I've heard of her."

"Have you also heard, by any chance, that she used to be a whore, in a house in New Orleans?" Marty looked uncomfortable, and shook his head, so I persisted, "Of course you haven't, so it would be news to you that your boy Willie Chase used to be Sarola's kept man."

Marty looked gray, even in the flickering orange glow of the firelight. He carefully examined the tip of his cigar, which shook in his trembling hand.

"I know you're not a man to make trouble with a lot of irresponsible talk, Jack," he said. "But that can't be true." He faltered, then added, reluctantly, "Unless it was a very long time ago."

"It was as recently as last year, Marty. As I understand it she chucked him out only last spring, when she came here with Lozzati. I know this is a blow, Marty, but you'll have to take my word. I was there. I saw it, and heard all about it."

He had pulled himself together, and now he shook his head emphatically.

"Will's past is his own business, Jack, and even though I might not like the idea of his being mixed up that way with a prostitute, as you are trying to tell me, I wouldn't argue with you about it if it were true. But it isn't true. I know for a fact that at the time you are speaking of, Will was engaged to be married to a very nice girl. . . She broke it off, over some unfortunate misunderstanding—but he's still hoping to get back together someday. He says he can't forget her. He told me the whole story."

This was important. I wasn't going to give up now, and leave Marty still in the dark about Chase and likely half mad at me.

"I know the kind of story he would have told you," I said, patiently. "He's good at that. He probably gave just enough of the facts to make it sound convincing while he prettied it up enough to make himself look good—not telling you, for example, that this nice girl was a whore named Sarola, or that he was not her fiance but her pimp—"

"You're all wrong, Jack!" Marty half shouted "As a matter of fact, he was telling me about this only a couple of evenings ago when he was here to dinner, and he showed me a picture of the girl. He had it in his wallet. It was *not* this Sarola! . . . Wait a minute." He calmed down then, still breathing heavily, and hoisted himself up from his chair to grin at me tri-

umphantly.

"I believe he left that picture here," he said. "Yes, I know he did, because Mama put it over here on the coffee table where she'd be sure to see it and remember to return it to him. Wait, now. I'll show it to you."

He moved out of the circle of the firelight into the shadows across the room, and groped around among the objects on the coffee table there, mumbling,

"I'll just show you how wrong you are. . . You must be thinking of two other fellows. This was only last year that Will was engaged to this girl. He was working with a brokerage in the East at the time, he said. Ah. Here we are. . . He was crazy about her, he said. You can see why."

He handed me a snapshot. Billfold size. I held it down where the firelight would fall on it to get a good look.

Now it was my turn to go pale.

The picture was of Karla.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

All I could manage to say to Marty Meeker was something like, "Sorry. As you say, I had it all wrong."

But it was enough. He must have thought I meant I was sorry about running down a sweet guy like Chase when, as Marty insisted, I didn't know what I was talking about. He took it the way it sounded to him, and let it go at that.

A few minutes later we were saying goodnight. He had his houseman drive me back to town, and he seemed his usual cheerful self as he put me in the car and went back into the house, probably to go to bed and sleep peacefully. If our little talk had upset him at all, it was not because it had raised any real doubts in his mind about Chase. At the most, it had merely dismayed him to learn that I entertained such mistaken

and unflattering notions about his fair-haired boy.

As for me, there seemed no way I could shake off the sick fury the sight of Karla's picture had roused in me, on top of that phoney story of Chase's. Every pleasant thought I'd ever had of Karla, every exciting memory and every fond hope for the future, turned back on me now, gagging me, slimy with the filth of her association with Chase. Slumping in the darkness in the leather-upholstered back seat of the car, I felt feverish with rage and loathing, and nauseated with the acid taste of hatred in my mouth.

I had Marty's man drop me off a few blocks from my apartment, thinking a walk in the bitterly cold wind might help. It didn't. On the way to the elevator in my apartment house I stopped, turned around and went back outside to buy a newspaper at the corner stand. Rolling it and slapping it against my thigh like a whip as I walked, I went in again and rode upstairs to my own apartment.

It was cold. I turned up the thermostatic control, mixed a stiff drink for myself, set it on the nightstand while I undressed, then sipped it after I got into bed to glance over the newspaper in the hope of getting my mind off the whole situation.

But I couldn't concentrate. There was the usual political stuff on the front page. I skipped it. Page two had an item about an abortion ring that had been a late item because the only names given were those of the arresting detective and one doctor. There was also a picture of the latest much-married glamor girl and her newest fiance (not yet free to marry her, of course.) And then, near the bottom of the page, a name caught my eye.

Sarola wasn't the kind of name many people had. I had always assumed she just made it up in a tipsy moment. Sarola Damon had taken an overdose of sleeping pills. Her maid had found her and called an ambulance. "An accident," her doctor had said.

I put the paper down and got up to make a fresh drink while I thought about it. Sarola had been seen with Chase, according to Mrs. Meeker. She really loved Lozzati, that was plain to see. What kind of pressure must Chase have used on her to induce her to see him, even to go out with him publicly while she was still living with the jealous Lozzati? No telling—but whatever Chase had done to her, it had been enough, apparently, to drive her to attempt suicide.

I looked back at the item; it said Sarola was out of danger, and I was glad. I hoped to hell she hadn't lost Lozzati on account of the dirty-dealing pimp she'd at least tried to get rid of. So far as I knew, Sarola played it pretty straight. She seemed about as honest as—as I'd once believed Karla was.

Why couldn't Chase and Karla have stuck together? They deserved each other. Sarola and I both, and a lot of other people as well, would have been a lot better off if Chase and Karla had confined all their double-crossing and lying to each other. They seemed to be evenly matched, while the rest of us poor suckers—like Sarola, and like me—didn't stand a chance with either one of them, let alone with the two of them at once.

It was rage that kept me lying awake far into the night. Rage and disgust, and something else. Something like grief. Grief over the death of happy illusion I had cherished about Karla.

I was sitting slouched over my desk, staring blankly at the wall, my mind not on my work, when Jones signalled me on the inter-com to announce a long-distance call next morning.

"Mrs. Mitchkin," she said.

"Tell her I'm out!" I snapped.

There was a startled silence. Then, before I could switch off the inter-com, Jones persisted, apparently anxious to make sure I'd heard the name right,

"Shall I take Mrs. *Mitchkin's* message?" She knew

what a big chunk of the business the Mitchkin account now amounted to.

"Don't bother," I said, and switched her off. Let her wonder. I was in no mood to explain a lot of things about which I was still puzzled myself.

Not that it wasn't all pretty clear, by now. It was just, maybe, that I didn't like the way it added up, so I was still stubbornly looking for an angle that would make Karla show up better.

But I was wasting my time. No matter how I figured it, Karla had once been mixed up with Chase, and very likely still was. There might have been a reasonable explanation for the incident at Miami; and it might have been coincidence, helped out some by Midge Hunt's tip-off, that brought them together again at La Fonda. Those two little details, one at a time or even put together, didn't have to mean anything incriminating. But when Chase carried Karla's picture around in his wallet, and showed it to his boss with a big story about how crazy about her he'd been and he was still hoping they'd get back together, there was no longer any possible shadows of a doubt about it. . . They'd get back together all right, I thought, grimly—just as soon as Mitchkin kicked off, leaving Karla all his money. No wonder Chase was so crazy about her!

Sure, the facts all fit. The only loose ends that didn't tie in so well were: (1) I was still crazy about her myself—might as well admit it, baffling as it was in the face of what I knew about her; and (2) even more baffling, she was still making a play for me—a discreet, lady-like play, by mail and long-distance phone, but nevertheless a real play. Why?

I had a chance to ask her myself, a couple of days later. . .

I had sent flowers to the Damon apartment, along with a good bottle of scotch for Lozzati. He dropped in at the office next day to say thanks.

"Sarola felt good that you remembered her. And

thanks for the scotch."

Apparently he'd harbored no grudge against me for my having mentioned Willard Chase's name the afternoon I'd accepted her invitation for cocktails and talk about Karla. It hadn't been Chase's name that had riled Lozzati, then, I decided, but just Sarola's reaction to it. That must mean he didn't know. . .

He didn't. That was clear as he went on,

"You know it wasn't no accident. Something's bothering her. She won't say what."

I said nothing. He studied my face, then sighed and looked down at his hands.

"I love that woman. I'd marry her in a minute, if she'd say okay—so it isn't that. I thought maybe she had some disease—cancer, say." He lowered his voice as though it were profanity. "But the doc says she's physically healthy, okay; she's just got something on her mind."

He waited, still standing, rocking on his heels just perceptibly betraying his overwrought state. I understood now why he had come. He wanted me to tell him what I knew. And he was so desperate to find out, I could safely tell him, without having to be afraid of arousing his wrath as on that other occasion when I'd blurted his rival's name.

I was tempted. All I had to do to get rid of Chase for keeps was let Lozzati know whom to blame for Sarola's suicide attempt. . . But I kept quiet. Not to protect Chase, because if Lozzati ever did bump him off he'd be doing me, and the world, a big favor. But to protect Sarola. I had no right to tell her secret. I had promised her, indirectly, that I never would.

Lozzati was still looking at me, waiting.

I said,

"Whatever it is, Sarola will get over it. Don't ever get the idea she doesn't love you, because she does, just as much as you love her. I've seen the way she looks at you."

"Thanks," Lozzati said. Reluctantly, he turned to leave, and then paused at the door. "By the way," he said. "She came home from the hospital yesterday. The doc says she has to stay in a while and rest. We'd like for you to drop in."

I thanked him and said I would. I waited, though, till the following afternoon. Meantime, Karla didn't telephone again, and I continued to ignore the request she'd left with Jones that I call her back.

When I got to Sarola's, I understood why Karla had tried to reach me by phone. She'd wanted to tell me she would be in town. If I had taken her call and found that out, I might have stayed away from Sarola's. As it was, when Karla opened the apartment door to me, I was entirely unprepared. If it had been Frankenstein standing there inviting me to come in, I couldn't have been any more shaken.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I practically fell into the chair Karla offered me. She was saying something about having flown down to be with Sarola, as soon as she saw the news in the paper, but I wasn't taking it in any too clearly. My vision was blurred with the shock, and it was a moment before I could focus on Sarola, lying on the couch in the living room, lovely in a white robe.

Lozzati wasn't there. I was glad of that. In his state of mind he would certainly have suspected something wrong in the way I must have looked for a couple of minutes before I could pull myself together. But if the girls noticed it, they weren't commenting on it.

"Larry said he went to see you," Sarola was saying. "But he forgot to mention Karla would be here. We were just saying we hoped you'd come over."

Karla nodded, and added,

"I had about given up trying to get you on the phone. . .?" Her voice rose questioningly, inviting me to explain.

I shook my head to clear it, and looked at her. She was different. The sensually exciting quality that had been so apparent in New Orleans was more subdued, and the breathtaking aura of glamor I had observed about her at La Fonda was hardly noticeable now. She was still maddeningly beautiful, but somehow unapproachable, very much the country society woman in her tweed skirt and cashmere sweater. . . I remembered her sweater that morning in Madame Fronzeh's, and found myself wondering how much she had on under this one. . . But this had to stop, I reminded myself, feeling a little panicky. She didn't seem to have lost any of her spellbinding power over me, but I wasn't going to let it throw me again.

"I'm sorry I missed your call, Karla," I said, and I meant it. I'd have given a lot to have been warned in time about this encounter, so I could have avoided it. It was going to be hard not to succumb to her new kind of allure. I turned to Sarola. "How are you feeling now?"

"Okay," she said. "The doctor says I'm supposed to be doing nothin' but sleep and eat."

"He's right," I said. "You've lost weight since I saw you last." I was willing to go along with the way Sarola wanted to play it, acting like she was just a happy housewife, more beautiful than most but completely satisfied with her domestic bliss, who was recovering nicely from something no more serious than a bad case of ptomaine.

To my dismay, however, she took my agreement as permission to excuse herself.

"I was just fixin' to go in the other room for a nap when you got here," she said, swinging herself up from the couch. "If you don't mind. You stay for dinner—Larry'll be back then. For now, you and Karla

can talk. . ."

Her face was perfectly straight. I didn't know what to say, but it wasn't necessary to say anything. Sarola moved serenely into the other room. The door closed behind her and the key turned in the lock. To all purposes, I was completely alone with Karla.

There was no hiding my confusion now. Karla saw it all right and she studied me thoughtfully, sitting curled in her chair, not moving. The way she looked at me, I might as well have been stark naked.

"Men are supposed to undress women with their eyes," I told her. "Not the other way around." I was trying to play it light, but my voice trembled.

She smiled, caressingly.

"It's been months since I've been alone with an able-bodied man. Let me dream."

"Karla—!"

"Oh, I'm not kicking," she said gravely. "Cy is nice and I knew when I married him he'd be more like a—well, a father. And he's very sick. I can't be tragic about it, Jack. We knew it was a matter of months when we got back from the honeymoon."

I was even more horrified. What was she, anyway, a vulture, beneath that lovely, too-desirable exterior? "We? You mean he knows his time is short?"

"Why be so—so outraged, Jack? How else could you figure it, if you were his age and sick?"

She snuggled more comfortably into the chair where she'd been sitting ever since she'd opened the door for me. She seemed not in the least aware of anything ghoulish about what she was saying, and she almost had me convinced that hers was a perfectly reasonable, even kindly, attitude, as she went on,

"I think that's why he likes me to learn about his business. He wants me to be able to handle it—afterwards. But I don't see it that way, and I told him I didn't think I'd be much good at it. So lately he's been talking about hiring someone to take over,

a kind of general estate manager who'd look after not only this buying and selling angle but the whole deal. And," she added meaningfully, "it's a very big deal. That's why Cy feels it is important to start grooming someone for the responsibility now. . ."

Because of the overpowering torrent of conflicting emotions charging through me, I was still having difficulty taking in all she said. But I caught this. If Mitchkin was starting now to train a man to handle his estate, Karla was undoubtedly influencing his choice of that man. . .She could easily bring Willard Chase into the deal at this point, but it seemed quite obvious she was not. Chase was still scrounging for a crooked buck around town; if he weren't, he wouldn't be bothering my secretary, and Sarola. No, the only man Karla had actually recommended to her husband, so far as I knew, was me!

All I could do was stare at her, totally confused.

"Jack," she said quietly, almost tenderly, "what's bothering you? Sarola told me you'd been here asking questions about me. All right, if there's anything you're still mixed up about, now's your chance to ask me."

If I didn't look at her, maybe I could think straight. I stood up and roamed aimlessly around the room a moment.

"Fair enough," I said then. I still carefully avoided looking at her while I tried to figure how to phrase my questions so as to trick the truth out of her. Finally I began, off-handedly,

"By the way, how's that twin sister of yours?"

"Paula?" she sounded really surprised, and then sorrowful as she replied, "I don't know. I haven't seen her for more than a year, Jack,"

"Is that right? Sarola told me you'd gone to New York to see her, before marrying Mitchkin."

"Well, then she must have told you I never did find Paula, didn't she?"

I took a deep breath. Either Karla was too quick for me, or she was actually telling the truth.

"Yes, I guess she did say something to that effect. What happened?"

"I wish I knew," Karla said. "First I got this angry letter, from Paula, reading me off but good for double-crossing her or letting her down in some way—I never could figure out what it was she thought I had done to her. So I went to New York to find out what was the matter. I thought maybe one of her friends or acquaintances had happened into Madame's and seen me there, and gone back and given Paula a bad time about it. Something like that. I'd been scared of that happening for a long time, and I guess Paula had been too. I was hoping that if I saw her I could fix things up somehow. But she was gone. I stopped at the hotel where she'd been staying, thinking she might come back. That's where I met Cyrus, incidentally. He'd met Paula there, and he mistook me for her, naturally. I explained I was Paula's sister, and asked him if he could help me locate her. He tried, but the most he could find out, from the model agency she'd worked for, was that she'd decided to go to Europe! Cyrus checked with all the airlines and steamship lines booking passage to Europe, without finding a trace of her. This took a couple of weeks, of course. . ."

"And meantime, he asked you to marry him," I said

"That's right, Jack, and since it seemed like I had lost Paula and I was pretty upset about it, I was glad to accept him. That's just about the end of the story, so would you mind telling me what you find so outrageous about it, and just why you are cross-examining me this way?"

I let myself look at her now, and saw angry lights dancing in her hazel eyes. It seemed to me she had every right to be angry, and I felt like a heel. It was on the tip of my tongue to apologize and ask her forgiveness, but I brought myself up short. She was get-

ting me spellbound again.

"You're the one who suggested I ask you any questions I had on my mind." I reminded her.

"That's right," she sighed. "So let's get this straightened out once and for all. What else do you want to know?"

I didn't know how to ask her. I hated to mention Chase's name at all, because I dreaded hearing the truth from her at last—and I didn't think I could stand it if she lied to me again. My throat was so dry it ached. I wet my lips with my tongue before I finally asked,

"When were you last in Miami?"

Her eyes grew wide. She looked mystified. Then she smiled, quizzically.

"Why, I've never been in Miami, Jack!"

Rage exploded in me. How could she be that stupid? She must have guessed, from my question, that I'd seen her there! She'd played it damn smart so far, why quit now? It wouldn't have been tough for her to think up a glib explanation real quick. Not even to bother was an insult to my intelligence!

Trying to hate her while I stood there looking at her was enough to drive me crazy. There was something damn strange here when she didn't even bother to lie. Staring at her, I became increasingly aware of the change in her, and I racked my mind trying to spot just what the change was. Her cheeks were a little fuller, though her face was still oval. She seemed a trifle more lush all over, so far as I could see, and it in no way diminished her appeal. She shifted her position, squirming under the intensity of my gaze, and her sweater pulled tight across her breasts. There the change really was pronounced. The little-girl breasts had become fuller—and that much more maddening to me.

Suddenly it struck me. How could I be sure that this was Karla at all? How did I know this mysterious

woman sitting here taunting me and torturing me was not the supposedly missing Paula. . .?

"Don't tell me what you're thinking," she said

"It's a bet," I said, levelly.

She was still smiling up at me, quizzically, teasing me, it seemed.

"You think I'm fat. Sarola said I was."

"You lose. I was wondering about a certain triangle of moles. Karla's mark. I haven't seen them for too long."

Her smile faded. Alarm glittered in her eyes. She swallowed, hard.

I stood over her, crazy with hating her and wanting her at the same time.

Staring up at me, transfixed, she whispered,

"If I—if I let you see them, will you promise not to do anything else?"

I dropped to my knees before her.

With fingers I could swear trembled she unbuttoned her cardigan sweater. This time she was wearing something underneath it—a nylon bandeau, white, that seemed less to control than to cradle her.

The moles were there. I was no longer capable of thought. I put out a finger and she did not stop me as I traced the small triangle, now deeper in the cleft because her breasts were fuller. I cupped her breasts, then put my mouth to the triangle of moles.

I felt myself drowning in desire, and I pulled her to me roughly, my lips on her brow, her eyes, her mouth. Suddenly I realized she was fighting me, pushing me away.

I let her go abruptly, more alarmed than angry. There had been panic in her.

I rose and stepped back, struggling to regain some control.

"Please, please, Jack," she half moaned, covering her face with her hands.

I could not know whether she meant please stop

or please go on, until she looked up at me.

"You know how much I have wanted you—still want you," she whispered. "But I'm a married woman, and I'm not going to cheat. If I'm free, when I'm free—oh, Jack, please make it easy for me to be good!"

Once, when I'd first learned she was married, I'd wanted her to remain virtuous more than I'd wanted to possess her. But that was before I had mentally accused her of lies and deceit. . . This pretense of virtue meant nothing now. I moved toward her, hand outstretched to pull her out of her chair.

"He'd never know," I said.

She shrank, cringing.

"But I'd know. And anyway, Jack, there's another reason. A private reason. . . A physical reason."

I dropped my arms at my sides, fists clenched. That trick struck me as more like Paula than Karla. But I said nothing. The tide of passion had engulfed me, leaving me dazed, shattered.

She was still talking to me, urgently, as if desperate to convince me. . . "But really, Jack, I want to be faithful to Cyrus. I owe him that. Please say you understand."

"Right now, I understand nothing," I said, tensely. "Give Sarola my regrets about dinner, will you?" I forced myself to move toward the door.

"Jack. . .?"

I closed the door behind me, and somehow, in a daze made my way home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Karla made no effort to contact me in the next couple of days, and for all I knew she had left Sarola's to return to Cyrus. I hoped so. I never wanted to see her again.

Jones looked at me strangely when I showed up at

the office early and stayed late, but kept her own counsel. I was trying to pull myself together the only way I knew how, by working hard. I knew I was going to pieces, and I was actually beginning to fear a nervous breakdown.

I was then that another blow at my sanity struck, from another direction.

The papers had been full of the abortion ring story, the one I had skipped over lightly when I first saw the news of Sarola's suicide attempt. In the days following, it was revealed that a patient had been taken in during the raid on one of the doctor's offices involved, but her name was not given.

The girl had been badly butchered, and was in the hospital. She was conscious, and giving testimony, and for her protection the police had kept her name a secret. Her existence had, however, been let slip and an alert reporter had put it into his story.

Then the girl died. The papers gave her name at last, and her story.

The girl was Midge Hunt.

When I recovered from the shock, I had no difficulty figuring it all out—her sickness, her reaction to being fired, her feeling that she could not get another job. She had given all her savings to Chase, I remembered, and I had advised her to get money from him. Maybe she had, and she had given it to the butcher who killed her. My blood ran cold as I realized my own unwitting part in the tragedy.

The name of the man who had fathered her unborn child was not given. It was not of direct importance to the police case, for one thing. For another, as I wasted no time finding out by some discreet inquiries of men I knew on the force, she had refused to give it.

I knew who he was, but even in death, Midge Hunt had protected Willard Chase.

I phoned Marty next, and made a date to take him and his wife out to dinner. I had no idea how I was

going to get it across to them, but I had to try once more to set them straight about this guy they were so fond of and trusted so completely. If I didn't succeed, they were in danger of getting hurt, too—and by now the damage Chase left in his wake amounted to something much more serious than broken hearts, betrayed confidences and wounded pride. By now, he was responsible for one attempted suicide and one death that I knew of. I was afraid for the Meekers.

As soon as I saw Marty's face, I knew he was deeply troubled. Mrs. Meeker, however, was her usual bland self, oozing maternal warmth.

We kept the talk general only through the soup course. By the time the waiter brought the roast beef, we were talking about Midge.

"Any idea who the father was, Marty?" I began. His troubled eyes met mine.

"I try not to think about it," he said. "She was a good girl."

"She was a tramp," Mrs. Meeker said smugly. "I knew all along Willie was right to break away from her."

I gaped at her incredulously while she went right on, clucking and sighing over innocent, lovable, tender-hearted Willie and the low-down, no-account women who were always taking advantage of his kindness and just wouldn't leave him alone.

Somehow I managed to get through the dinner, and then I excused myself. A headache, I said.

My head did ache. It felt like it was ready to burst. I was so sick of people I could have puked. Mrs. Meeker was a mealy-mouthed bitch and Marty was a fool. Sarola and Lozzati were hardly friends of whom one could be proud—if I could count them friends at all. Deana? Vicious. I wanted no more of her. Beth? She took herself too seriously. Karla and Chase? I actually ground my teeth and slammed the door shut behind me, turning the key in the lock as

if that were necessary to insure my privacy in my own apartment—the only place I wanted to be, the one place where I could be sure of solitude.

I headed straight for a mirror and studied my face for several minutes, then expressed my opinion aloud.

"You look lousy," I told my reflection. "You look sixty instead of thirty-one."

My eyes were puffy, my skin seemed discolored, and the sprinkling of gray at the temples looked seedy instead of distinguished. I dropped my clothes and climbed into a shower as hot as I could stand it.

A final cold splash and I felt somewhat better, but I still could not quiet my churning thoughts.

Why was I letting the whole rotten situation do this to me? What did I want? Karla? All right. I wanted her. She affected me more than any woman ever had. She was in my blood. But I could live without her. There were other women. I had enjoyed others before meeting Karla, and since. Why not find a mistress? It would not be hard to select a beautiful girl who would appreciate security and pay for it with caresses. . . I tried to visualize her and her apartment, and suddenly I felt nauseated. For the first time I was sick of sex, sick of casual encounters, sick of everything.

Could it be my own hatred for Chase that was upsetting me? Hate was a wasteful emotion. It was one thing to watch out for him, protect my business interests from his dirty, underhanded tactics; that much was only good sense. But it was another thing to make myself sick over him, drive myself crazy hating him; that was doing me harm—more harm than the man himself had ever been able to do me.

I went back into the bathroom and took a couple of sleeping pills. Only then did I lie down in bed, turn my face to the wall, and close my eyes to wait for a few hours' drugged sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The next few weeks saw me living a monastic life. I got to the office early and left late. I cleared up all my correspondence and set out with determination after business I didn't particularly need.

I decided to go ahead with any and all Mitchkin business that came my way through his office, so long as I could avoid contact with Karla. She had started it, for some perverse reason of her own that I might never fathom, and I might as well take advantage of it. Each Mitchkin deal seemed better than the last; I had about made up my mind that the man was a genius—it couldn't all be luck. And for some time Karla neither wrote nor telephoned. I refused to admit to myself that I missed her letters, yearned for the sound of her voice.

I lunched at my desk most of the time, occasionally met a customer for dinner. Then home to a book and bed—alone. I took off a few pounds and stayed away from liquor, except for the inevitable highball when out with a customer.

The results were not long in showing. My belt came in a couple of notches and the puffiness left my face. I began to look thirtyish again, instead of well into middle-age.

When my thoughts turned in disturbing directions, I turned them away again, smothered them with business details. When that didn't seem enough, I enrolled at a local gym and began to concentrate on getting into really sharp condition.

The gym director complimented me, and I could see for myself that as the weeks rolled by I could outrun some men of ten years less than I had accumulated. I did not try to compete with the youngsters; there is something a twenty-year-old has in the way of energy no older man can match, whatever his condition.

So I was much aware of health matters on the day Marty Meeker came to see me. He had phoned for an appointment, not asking to speak to me, but simply telling Jones he wanted to see me and asking her to call back if I agreed. I was just to name the time; he was at my convenience.

Perhaps, I thought, Marty imagines I'm sore at him. I'd begged off two invitations to dinner, and had not seen him since the night I had taken him and his wife to dinner. So when he entered my office, I rose to greet him with a smile and handshake.

His face lit up briefly, and I tried to hide my concern. He looked awful.

He seemed to have shrunk in height, spread in width. But it wasn't fat; he had always been pudgy, and I doubted if he weighed more. It was a kind of loosening, as though some starchy fiber had collapsed and let him sag.

His face was drawn, and there were puffs under the eyes such as I had noticed on myself, but much worse.

"I know," he said, "I look terrible."

Apparently I had not managed to hide my reaction.

"I'm sorry to agree," I said. "Is your health bad?"

"No worse than usual," he said. "It's my mind that troubles me—and maybe my heart." He laughed a little, as though deprecating his sentimentality.

I offered him a cigar and he took it, cutting off the end and sucking on it to light it in his methodical fashion. At last he was satisfied, and settled into the chair.

"Jack, I want to discuss something with you in absolute privacy. I need your help."

I swung my chair around to face him directly.

"Anything I can do," I said. "I'm glad to know you trust me."

"I do," he said, "now. Maybe I should have trusted you more—before."

He seemed hesitant about explaining, but I understood.

"Chase?" I asked, quickly.

He nodded.

"I don't know what to do. He—he inspired so much confidence in me, at first. Frankly, I haven't felt quite up to handling the whole business by myself, for some time. I guess I never have been much of a go-getter, anyhow. I was glad to take in a younger man with plenty of energy and ambition and—it seemed to me—ability, and pretty much turn things over to him. I gave him big advances against salary and commission, staked him to a new car—" He shook his head.

"And—" I prompted.

"And he still owes me a lot of money. The car he wrecked, and it turned out he didn't bother to have it insured. At first it looked as if he'd earn every cent of his salary, but the way it's turned out, he's so far into me for advances that the only way I could get it back is not to pay him at all. I'm afraid Mama—Mrs. Meeker—wouldn't hear of any such tactics as that. You know how she is about him."

"I know," I said, grimly. "It wouldn't do any good anyway. He'd just quit the job."

Marty sighed and nodded. His eyes were brooding and he did not seem inclined to go on with his story.

"He's a good salesman, though, isn't he?" I asked, to encourage him to continue.

Marty shrugged.

"Yes and no. He makes a fine first impression, and he's made some good sales. He gets those tips—" Here he remembered where Chase had gotten them and looked uncomfortable. "And he follows through fast. He has gotten tips since Midge left your office," he added, with a little show of spirit.

"Why not? Other men have foolish secretaries."

That hurt him, though he certainly had not been to blame for Chase's ruining the girls. Ruining was the

word for it, old-fashioned or not. I'd have been willing to bet Midge Hunt was a virgin before she met him; now she was decaying in the earth.

"I try not to believe he was the man," Marty said, his thoughts having kept pace with my own.

"Face the facts, Marty. Even if you still can't believe what I told you about Chase and Sarola—and I could tell you about that girl in the picture he showed you, too, if you wanted me to—you certainly know how it was when he met Midge. He dated her at once, saw her regularly for a while. She loved him enough to do me dirt, when up to that time she seemed to like her job well enough, and I don't think she had anything against me. Then she's sick for a while, throws up, that kind of thing. Suddenly he isn't seeing her anymore—and he tells your wife he's only trying to be *fair* to the girl."

Marty winced. I hated to hurt him like this, but I could see he was almost convinced, so I kept on.

"Did you know she gave him all her money?"

Marty's head came up with a jerk. "My God! How do you know?"

"She told me when she—left here. That is, she said she didn't have a dime, and it was pretty clear where it had gone. I made some crack about her getting it back because he certainly owed her something on that Mitchkin deal she tipped him to."

"If she did tip him to that, he probably gave her a commission," Marty blurted, still trying dazedly to defend Chase.

"Probably he did, after she went to him, on my advice, and asked for it. Where else did she get the money to pay that butcher who killed her?"

There was a gasp, and then what could only be a strangled sob. Before my horrified eyes, Marty Meeker was crying.

I just looked at him for a few sickening minutes. He wasn't a pretty sight. The man was in bad health

and a bad state of mind, and now it was as if some final thread had snapped. I was torn by feelings of pity, embarrassment, and disgust.

Finally, I got to my feet and walked to the door softly. I would be kinder to leave him alone—and, besides, I didn't think I could stand seeing him mop his face or apologize.

The last sight, as I closed the door behind me, was Marty's hunched, heaving shoulders.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The holidays had come and gone while I was on my physical culture kick, and I had scarcely noticed them, letting Jones send out the greeting cards and for the first time in years, making no attempt to drink the year in.

I was late getting to the office. I had overslept, not unnaturally, and lingered over coffee in the lunch-room near my office building.

Reverend Browning approached my table, to my surprise. Of course I asked him to join me, and he did so as though he had been hoping for the invitation. In fact, as it developed, he had been looking for me.

"Mr. Heflin," he began, "I was on my way to see you." His voice trembled, and I looked at him curiously. "Mr. Heflin, I—" Here he faltered completely, and I signalled the waitress to hurry with the coffee.

"Drink this hot," I said.

He gulped it down black, as though it were a shot of whiskey.

"Forgive me," he said after a moment. "I am upset but—you will understand that it isn't without cause. Mr. Heflin, when did you see my daughter last?"

Immediately it hit me. Apparently the poor man did have cause to be upset. I had not seen Beth with

Willard Chase. . . But I answered carefully, lest I might be under suspicion myself,

"Why, it was back in October, wasn't it, or maybe early November, when I called at your home and walked her to class?"

"You haven't talked with her more recently?"

"As a matter of fact, no, I haven't talked with her. I'm afraid that after so many years I just wasn't able to accustom myself to attending church," I apologized, still evading the question because I thought I'd better find out what the trouble was before talking too much.

"I hope there's nothing wrong?"

"So do I, Mr. Heflin, so do I. I will speak to you frankly, trusting you to respect the confidence." He paused, and I nodded reassuringly. He went on, "I may as well tell you that I came to you first because of all Beth's acquaintances, you were the only more—more worldly man I could recall having met." He chewed painfully at his lower lip. "Please forgive me for my thoughts. But there must be a man in this situation, and except for yourself, I knew of no friend of hers who might involve her in this sort of thing."

Was she pregnant? I speculated, a little wildly. How long had she been seeing Chase, anyway if she had? I was a little nettled that Browning should have pegged me as the culprit, whatever the trouble was, but I asked, sympathetically,

"What sort of thing?"

"She is gone. I don't know where. Her room was not slept in last night, and a note was on her pillow. You know more of the world than I do, Mr. Heflin. Perhaps you can help me interpret it." He held out the note.

"Dear Folks (it read)—

"Please do not worry about me. I must do this in my own way, but no harm will come to me. You will hear from me soon. Just know that I am very happy. Your Beth."

I looked at Reverend Browning's horror-stricken countenance, and sought for some words of reassurance, though I was beginning to feel very much the way he looked. I didn't want to say anything until I did some checking, so I suggested,

"To me, it reads as though Beth has eloped."

"That was her mother's reaction. Yet why doesn't she say so clearly? And with whom has she eloped, if that's what she means?"

"She hasn't been making any plans in that direction?"

"Not that we know of."

"Hasn't she shown any preference for any one man? One of her classmates, perhaps?" I hoped he would say yes to this one, but he shook his head with an anguished sigh.

One more question, and I'd be pretty sure. I figured Chase would be very nearly out of ready cash by now—now that Marty Meeker had wised up to him. So I asked,

"Did Beth have any money of her own? Any savings?"

Browning shook his head again, but then added,

"Of course, she took care of the treasury for the Group. Banked it, kept track of it and all—funds accumulated from the regular collections at the meetings. They were saving for a new record-player or something, I believe, and the fund amounts to perhaps two hundred dollars now. But why do you ask? Beth certainly would not borrow from that fund for any purpose of her own."

No, not for any purpose of her own. But after a few hours of Chase's special kind of fast-talk, she might have been convinced that there was no better investment for the church group's money—on a temporary basis, of course—than Chase's current scheme.

"I'm just trying, like you, to figure things out," I told the distraught father. "If I can think of any

ideas that might help, I'll let you know. But for the time being, it seems to me that we should all do as Beth asks, and not worry about her. She says in her note that no harm will come to her. . ."

"I'll try not to worry," Browning said heavily. "Thank you, Mr. Heflin, for your concern, and for your reassurance."

I shook his hand firmly, and watched him leave the lunchroom. As soon as he was out of sight, I hurried upstairs to make a phone call.

Jones looked up from her desk quickly as I entered the reception room and hurried on through toward my own office without pausing to wish her goodmorning.

"Mr. Heflin," she called. "Mrs. Mitchkin has been trying to reach you by phone. She wants you to call her back as soon as possible."

I was surprised. Karla hadn't contacted me since that day at Sarola's. I had been handling all Mitchkin business directly through Mitchkin's office, dealing only with his staff.

"That can wait," I said, irritably. "Get me Meeker's office on the phone, will you?"

Jones studied me anxiously, then shook her sleek dark head in bewilderment as I went on into my private office to take the call there.

In a moment Jones signalled me on the inter-com.

"Mr. Meeker didn't come in to his office today," she told me. "His secretary says he's ill. Shall I call him at his home?"

"By all means," I said.

I waited impatiently for Jones to make the connection. How long had Marty been sick? I wondered. Hell, he'd been sick several days ago when he'd visited me here at my office. The shock of learning some of the facts about Chase had probably completely unsettled him. . .I couldn't disturb him with this latest development, I decided.

"Mrs. Meeker is on the line," Jones announced.

I picked up the phone.

"Mrs. Meeker, this Jack Heflin. Marty's secretary said he is ill. Nothing serious, I hope?"

He needed rest, she said. He'd been working too hard, poor dear. If she'd told him once, she'd told him a thousand times, he must get some of the responsibility off his own shoulders, distribute it to others—or else appoint a man to take charge of the business and retire altogether. The doctor had told him the same thing. With proper care, the doctor had said, his heart would give him many more years' faithful service, but undue strain would be bad. . .

"He never would listen to advice, though," she sighed. "When he had the chance—to turn the business over to someone he really could trust, he passed it up! I suppose you know he let Willie go?"

"He did?" I said.

"And only because he didn't want to admit to himself that it was time to let a younger man take over. Hard to believe a sensible man like him could be so stubborn, isn't it? I'll tell you, it's all got me so upset I don't know what to do. And now that Marty is down in bed, doctor's orders, it's too late!"

"What is too late, Mrs. Meeker?" I asked patiently.

"It's too late to put Willie in charge," she explained. "He's already left town—and you can't blame him. My goodness, it must have been quite a blow to him when Marty let him go like that, with no reason—no reason at all! Just his stubborn pride, refusing to admit he's getting old. Well, I'm not the kind to say I-told-you-so, but it's plain as the nose on his face, if he'd only see it."

"What's that, Mrs. Meeker?" I was amazed at my own patience.

"That's he's passed up the kind of chance that doesn't come twice in a lifetime. You don't find a likeable, sincere, responsible man like Willie every day, you know. It just shows you how much in demand

a man like that is—ever since he left here, people have been calling him, trying to get in touch with him. They even call here at the house!"

She really was all worked up. I thought of telling her that Chase had never left town at all during the past few days, until, possibly, last night. But she wouldn't believe me, of course. In fact, I doubted that she would ever believe anything I might say about her Willie-boy.

And, indeed, she went on now,

"It was partly your influence, you know! Marty realized that you didn't care much for Willie, and I'm sure that had something to do with his decision to let him go. Well, there's no use crying over spilt milk I guess, but it is all very regrettable. If I only knew where to reach Willie now—you wouldn't happen to have any idea, would you?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Meeker. I'm sorry. Would you tell Marty I called, and give him my best? And if there is anything I can do for him, anything at all—"

"You let us know right away if you hear anything about Willie, won't you? I don't know if he would come back into the business after the inexcusable way Marty treated him, but I'd like to get in touch with him anyway. So many people have been trying to call him. That one girl even came here to the house, just this morning."

I had been on the point of cutting her off, I was so fed up with her ranting and raving. But at this I perked up my ears. Girl? Could it possibly have been Beth?

"What girl?" I asked quickly.

"The girl he was so much in love with," Mrs. Meeker sighed.

Maddening woman.

"Which one?" I persisted.

"Which one?" She sounded truly aghast. "Why, there was only one. The girl he used to be engaged to, that he wanted so badly to make up with. . . Marty told

me he showed you her picture!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The good-looker sitting at the bar gave me no rise. Her smile in my direction should have been enough to lift the spirits of any lonely bachelor. But this time I wasn't affected.

Pat, the barkeep, was looking at me quizzically by now. He'd never before seen me so disinterested in a girl, no matter what mood I was in. At a gesture from me he stopped what he was doing and brought me another rye and soda highball.

"Nice, huh?" he murmured, nodding his head toward the brunette at the end of the bar.

"Very," I said, without looking up.

Pat shrugged and went back to slicing lemons.

The drinks had helped, although I couldn't stop thinking about the whole rotten mess. My churning thoughts no longer hurt so much, as the rye was starting to kill the pain. Why I persisted to believe that Karla was running after Chase, why it mattered any longer, was more than I could ascertain. What she did was her own business; a married woman, why should anybody other than her husband care what she did?

But I did care. It hurt me down to the last tube in my mess of guts! I suppose all along I'd secretly felt that some miraculous something would come about, proving that Karla had actually never had anything to do with Chase. But at that distraught moment no such good fortune appeared in sight.

With disgust toward myself, and disheartened sickness, I rose, paid my last debt to Pat, and made my way back to my apartment. Everything about the place seemed dismal and deserted. I tried to discourage my loneliness by digging up a vivid thought of Deana.

I recalled the short evening with Beth Browning. I even allowed myself to make a mental survey of more than ten other women who so briefly had entered my life.

It was no use. The Queen of Madame Fronzeh's returned to dominate my thoughts and harass me through the evening. At a point of mental derangement I undressed and lay beneath the covers. It was nearly morning before I finally was benefited by a few winks.

Jones took in my haggard condition at a glance when I arrived late at the office next day. She made no comment, but informed me, a shade reproachfully, that Canada had been calling again.

I grunted my indifference and went on into my office. Then it hit me. I went back out and looked at Jones.

"Again?" I asked. "Did you say Canada has been calling again?"

"That's right. Mrs. Mitchkin. She called you yesterday morning, and, since you apparently didn't return the call," she made this meaningful, "she tried again this morning—about an hour ago. Let's see—"

"Never mind that," I said quickly, as Jones started to check her memoranda to get the exact time of Karla's call. "You're sure she was telephoning from Canada yesterday? Not from right here in town?"

Flipping over to the previous page on her desk calendar, but acting as though she were already sure of her facts, Jones read aloud, "Aspenmoor—Banff, Canada. . ."

"But I thought—wait. Get me the Meeker home, will you?" I would check with Mrs. Meeker. She must have been mistaken about Karla coming out to the house in search of Chase. It must have been some other girl. I had got all worked up over nothing, it seemed. My head began to throb. "No," I told Jones, "hold it. Let me try to do something about this head of mine, first."

She was all sympathy.

"Would some aspirin help? I have some right here."

She fished the box out of her desk drawer, shook two tablets into my slightly shaky hand, and hurried to the water cooler to fill a paper cup for me.

"Now," she said, handing me the cup of water, "swallow this." Obediently, I took the two aspirin and washed them down, and she added, "Go out and get yourself a cup of coffee, and you'll feel a lot better."

"Thanks, Jones," I said. "You're a good girl. I'll be back in ten minutes."

It was more like twenty minutes and two cups of coffee later when I returned, feeling only a little better but ready, now, to do some checking by telephone. If Karla had called me from the Mitchkin home in Banff, yesterday morning, she couldn't possibly have been the girl who had gone out to Meeker's home looking for Chase. So all I had to do was find out who had been mistaken—and I felt like betting that the one who had been wrong had been Mrs. Meeker. She'd sounded pretty confused anyway, when I'd talked to her.

"I'll try that call to the Meeker home, now," I told Jones as I hurried into the office.

She gestured, to attract my attention to a woman seated in the armchair in the corner of the reception room, apparently waiting to see me, and was about to announce the visitor when something about my expression stopped her.

I had frozen in my tracks.

"Karla!" I blurted.

Her hazel eyes widened. Her lips curved in an ironic smile as she rose, and moved toward me. She extended her hand to me, and her body undulated provocatively in a gesture that was confusingly familiar.

It was all just a little too much for a man with a bad hangover to take in, but somehow I got it sorted out in my mind. I accepted her hand with a twinge of dis-

taste and said,

"Pardon me. I mean, Paula. This is an unexpected surprise, to say the least."

"I'm sure you never expected to see me again, Jack," she said. "Well, I've come only to ask you a question or two, and I assure you it won't take long—if I could talk to you in private?"

She arched her eyebrows in Jones's direction.

Jones sniffed her disapproval of Paula, and bent her dark head over her typewriter.

"Come on in my office," I said, and led the way. When I had closed the door, I said, "All right. This is private."

She sat down, taking her time about it, and arranged herself decorously in the chair, crossing her lovely legs and smoothing the skirt of her striking black suit over her knees. She opened her purse and took a cigarette for herself.

I lit her cigarette, and sat down at my desk.

The suddenness of all these unexpected developments, on top of the kingsize hangover I had spent all day yesterday acquiring, was devastating. With a great effort at control, I lit a cigarette for myself, and made no attempt to start the conversation. I could wait as long as Paula could.

Finally, after absently dabbing at an ash that had fallen on her jacket sleeve, Paula came right to the point.

"I thought you might be able to tell me where I can find Willard Chase," she said.

It took a second or two to penetrate. Then elation overwhelmed me. It must have been Paula, not Karla, who had gone to the Meekers' looking for Chase. Then possibly it had been Paula in that snapshot Chase carried around and spoke of as his former fiancée, the girl he loved. . . Paula, not Karla! I was too excited to figure it all out—but I didn't have to figure it out for myself any more. Here was my chance to find out

for sure—if I played it smart. . .

Cautiously, I began,

"What made you think so?"

Paula was too desperately determined to get the information she'd come for to get indignant about my stalling.

"Karla told me," she said, "to ask you, if I didn't locate him at the Meeker firm. And I didn't. I even went out to Mr. Meeker's home to inquire, but his wife said she didn't know where Willard had gone. . . Do you know?"

"Karla told you," I repeated, wonderingly, completely ignoring her question. "But last time I talked to Karla, she said she hadn't been in touch with you for over a year—except for one letter from you, I think she said."

"That's right," Paula said, impatiently. "But I wrote to her again just a week ago, and she telephoned me just as soon as she got my letter. I asked her if she could help me locate Willard, and she sent me here, giving me Meeker's name and—much to my surprise, yours."

"I'll just bet you were surprised," I said, beginning to enjoy this. "But believe me, you're no more surprised than I am. It's certainly news to me that you're acquainted with Willard Chase!"

"Slightly more than just acquainted," she said, bitterly. "Do you know where he is?"

I grinned. This was really fun, now.

"I should have thought Karla would know where he is," I ventured, watching Paula's expression closely.

"Why?" Swift sparks of anger and—I thought—jealousy flashed in her eyes.

"Well, Karla and Chase are old friends, aren't they?" I asked, hoping, almost praying, she wouldn't say yes.

She said,

"Not that I know of. Look, Jack, just what are you

trying to tell me. You were dropping the same kind of nasty little hints about Karla and Willard when you pulled that scene in my hotel room in New York, last spring. You tried to make me think then that there was something going on with the two of them, and now you're hinting at the same thing again. Karla tells me it isn't true."

"What isn't true?"

She leaned forward and stabbed out her cigarette in the ashtray on my desk.

"If you have any reason beyond sheer viciousness to play games with me like this, I don't know what it would be."

"You're the one who liked to play games, Paula," I said. "At least, you played me for a sucker when I first met you, remember?"

She shrugged. "All right. So your way of getting even is to drop these spiteful little hints—"

"No," I cut in. "You're wrong. Last time I saw you, in New York, I guess I was trying to get even. And I've regretted it ever since. At the time, I wasn't mad at you so much as at Karla, actually. As for what you call spiteful hints, you're wrong. I'm just making a statement of fact, when I speak of Karla and Chase being old friends."

"I don't know," she said, miserably, slumping back in her chair, abandoning her air of outrage and indignation. There was even a suggestion of tears shimmering in her eyes as she said,

"Karla swore to me that she scarcely knew Willard at all, except as a man who was going with another—with a girlfriend of hers, and that was before I ever met him! She said when she ran into him again unexpectedly in New Mexico, last summer, it was the first time she'd seen him since he left New Orleans—with me."

"With you?" I shot out of my chair and leaned across the desk toward her. "Willard Chase left

New Orleans with you?"

She started to sniffle. The tears spilled out of her eyes and trickled down her face.

I felt compassion for her. I gave her my handkerchief and watched her anxiously while she wept into it for a moment. When at last she had regained her composure somewhat, I sat down again, and waited for her to explain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"I'm all mixed up," Paula said. Her voice was husky from crying. "I don't know what to think."

"Well, suppose you tell me how you happened to be in New Orleans with Willard Chase in the first place," I suggested, "and maybe I can help you figure things out."

"All right." She took a deep breath. "I went to New Orleans to see Karla. I wanted to tell her about Cyrus. . . I suppose it will also be a surprise to you to learn that I nearly married Cyrus Mitchkin myself?"

It was a surprise, all right, but so was everything else.

"It seems to me that Karla did say Mitchkin had known you in New York. That's how it happened he spoke to Karla when he saw her, later, at your hotel."

"People mistaking her for me or me for her is an old story," Paula said, wryly. "It's been going on all our lives. It was the one thing I was particularly anxious to avoid when I met Cyrus Mitchkin. It looked like my big chance. I don't have to tell you that I was determined to marry money. There's no use pretending otherwise, at this late date. Well, it looked to me like this was it—and I didn't want anything to louse it up."

"Were you and Mitchkin actually planning to be married—before he met Karla?"

"He wasn't, but I was. He seemed to like me well

enough, and I was sure it was just a matter of time. We were just getting well acquainted, when he had to leave town on some business matter he was interested in. We had agreed to get together when he returned in two weeks, so in the meantime I decided to fly down to New Orleans to see Karla. I wanted to tell her about him, and warn her not to take a notion to drop in on me suddenly while I was in the midst of trying to land myself a millionaire. I knew Karla would understand. She wouldn't want to miff it for me."

I nodded. I knew that was true.

"But you didn't ever get together with Karla in New Orleans?"

Paula shook her head.

"I wanted to be careful. I couldn't just go to that house where she was working. Madame Fronzeh's. Karla had told me she made it a point not to let anybody there even know she had a twin sister. So I checked into a hotel when I got in town, and was going to phone her to meet me somewhere when—" She sighed, and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, what happened was one more case of mistaken identity."

"Willard Chase?"

"That's right. He noticed me in the hotel lobby, and thought I was Karla. At first, I let him think I was."

"Why in the world would you do that?"

"Simply because I was so anxious not to let it be known that Karla and I were twins," she said, patiently. "Can't you see how important to me that was at the time?"

"Yeah. I guess so," I said. "But are you trying to tell me you had Chase believing you were your sister?"

"Not for long," she admitted. "But then, after a while, I didn't care. . ."

A dreamy look had come into her eyes, and suddenly I realized it as clearly as if she had spelled it out for

me. "You fell for him, didn't you?" I said.

She nodded. "He was in love with me, too," she said, in a hushed, rapturous tone. "It was wonderful then. We just clicked, at first sight. I guess it happens like that once in a lifetime."

No telling how many times it had happened in Chase's lifetime, I was thinking to myself, grimly. But on the other hand, maybe with Paula it had been the real thing—for him too.

"We seemed to be so much alike," she was saying. "We had everything in common. I forgot all about Karla, Mitchkin, everything. Willard and I went on down to Miami together—"

"My God!"

"What?" She looked up, startled at my outburst.

I held my head in both hands, momentarily overcome. What a damn fool I had been! If only I had used a little ordinary common sense, I could have figured it all out long ago! But how could I have believed that the girl I saw with Chase was Paula, instead of Karla? So far as I knew at the time, Paula had never met Chase, never even been near New Orleans—whereas Karla had told me herself that Chase had made passes at her! I'd been a damn fool, and how I had suffered for it!

"What's the matter?" Paula was repeating.

"Nothing," I groaned. "I'm just beginning to get this straight, now. You were saying that you and Chase went to Miami together, forgetting all about Mitchkin and everything. . .?"

"Well, I didn't completely forget. I told Willard about Cyrus and his millions, and he was very much interested, naturally."

"Naturally."

"Why not? Oh, of course you couldn't understand! You're heeled, Jack. You're used to money. You simply can't grasp the point of view of people who don't have all they want!"

"Look, honey," I said, patiently. "I grasp the point of view, all right. I've been poor, and when I was poor I wanted to be rich. Just like you. Just like Chase. The difference between me and you two is just this: I was always willing to work for all I wanted!"

She sulked, tapping her fingernails on my desk top, staring at the wall behind me.

"Let's not make an issue of it," I said, finally. "I suppose the way you and Chase go about it is work too." I offered her a cigarette. She hesitated a moment, then accepted it in a gesture of truce. I lit it for her then lit one for myself.

"So," I said, to get her started again, "Chase was interested in your millionaire. He thought you ought to go back to New York and hook him, and then he'd join you later and divvy up the profits. Is that right?"

"Something like that," she admitted, eyeing me coldly.

"So what happened?"

"Several things happened. You, for one."

"Me?"

"I had just got back to New York and started seeing Mitchkin again—and I thought I was beginning to get somewhere too—when you came along to break the news about Karla running around with Willard."

I passed my hand over my eyes.

"I was wrong about that," I said, wearily. "I'm sorry. I saw you with Chase in Miami, and I thought you were Karla. No wonder I upset you so, that day. Is that why you broke it up with Mitchkin?"

"Partly, but there was another reason too. You weren't entirely to blame. After all, I couldn't very well go on trying to get Cyrus to marry me, when I was pregnant!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes."

"Chase?"

"Of course."

"Is that why you went to Europe?"

"I didn't go to Europe. I went to Los Angeles to have the baby, but I didn't want anybody to know—least of all, Karla, because I still believed what you had said about her, and I thought I hated her. Then—well, after the baby was born I thought things over. I wanted so desperately to see Willard again I thought I would swallow my pride and hurt feelings and get in touch with Karla, to find out where he was. I had read about Karla and Cyrus in the papers, of course—which only made me hate her more. So I knew where to write to her. . . . As soon as she got my letter, she telephoned me and straightened it all out. She was telling me the truth when she said she hardly knew Chase."

"It looks that way," I agreed.

"She advised me to come here, and she wired me the money I needed. Well." She looked me in the eye. "I guess that brings us up to date. Now will you tell me where I can find Willard?"

"Look, Paula. I'd tell you if I knew. But why do you want to get mixed up with him again? He got you pregnant, deserted you. Why don't you get smart and steer clear of him?"

"Because of the baby," she said, emphatically. "He's the father of my child. That's why I'm going to find him, whether you help me or not."

She stood up, and started to leave.

"I'll help you, if I possibly can," I said, getting up, too, and coming around the desk. "I may be able to find out something. I heard about a caper yesterday that sort of fits his description."

"What was that?"

"Some guy robbed a church fund and ran off with the minister's daughter. . . ."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at me. For a minute I thought she would slap me. Then, to my amazement, she said, "Yes, that sounds like him. Where did

they go?"

"You still want him?"

"I don't know. Maybe when I see him I'll decide."

"Okay. I don't know where they went, but if I find out, I'll let you know."

She said she'd stay in town a few more days, waiting for news of Chase, and if I heard any, I could call her at her hotel. Then she swept on out of the office.

Jones stared after her, then looked at me. She waited, hopefully, for some explanation. When I made none, she asked,

"Shall I try the Meeker home for you now?"

"No, we can forget that call, Jones. Get Banff, Canada, for me, will you? I want to speak to Mrs. Mitchkin."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When the telephone rang at the Mitchkin home, Aspenmoor, it was not Karla herself who answered, nor a servant, but Oglethorpe, from Mitchkin's office, the man with whom I had been transacting most of the Mitchkin business.

He told me that Mrs. Mitchkin was unable to come to the telephone now, but the purpose of her call to me had been to inform me of her husband's urgent request that I come to the home to see him at once, if at all possible.

"If possible!" I exclaimed. "I'll leave here immediately!"

Oglethorpe must have been surprised, thinking he'd never found me so enthusiastic about the business before. . . I could hardly explain to him that the real reason I was so elated was Karla.

As soon as I hung up, I asked Jones to make reservations for me for the trip, and I told her she could close up the office while I was gone, as there wasn't

much going on, and if necessary, I could always call her at her home during my absence.

Then I was on my way. I could hardly wait to see Karla now, to tell her all about the crazy confusion that had fouled everything up with us, and assure her that it was all straightened out now.

Such beautiful women shouldn't have twin sisters! I thought. But from here on, it was not going to be a problem any more.

Maybe Karla still could not be mine. That didn't seem to matter so much now, strangely. Just knowing the truth, knowing that she was and had always been the girl I'd first believed her to be, made me completely happy. Someday—who could tell? Someday we might get together at last, as we should have, long ago, if I hadn't been such a damn fool. For now—well, it could be very, very nice just knowing each other.

My train stopped at Banff just at dusk. Winter was lingering late there; though the air was clear and cold, and there were no storm clouds in the sky, the snow still lay deep all around.

I stamped up and down the station platform, heard the jingling of sleigh bells and turned to see a sight that might have come from a child's picture book: a shining red sleigh drawn by a jet black horse. It stopped in front of me, and a stalwart Bohemian-looking fellow dropped the reins, jumped down and went for my bags.

"Sorry you had to wait, Mr. Heflin!" It was Oglethorpe, in the sleigh, beckoning to me.

As I climbed in beside him, he explained,

"The situation is in quite a turmoil at the house, as you'll soon understand. I'm awfully glad you've come."

Until this moment, I had scarcely given a thought to the real purpose of this invitation, which had come from Cyrus Mitchkin. I had been too absorbed in thoughts

of Karla.

Now I said quickly,

"I'm completely at Mr. Mitchkin's service and I'm very glad, too, that I could come. But naturally I have no idea why I'm here. . . I hope this means that Mr. Mitchkin is feeling better?"

The servant had stowed my bags and picked up the reins again. The sleigh was moving swiftly over the snow, bells jingling merrily.

Oglethorpe shook his head, gravely.

"Just the contrary, I'm afraid, Mr. Heflin."

I glanced at him inquiringly, but he volunteered no further information. An odd, wispy little fellow, Oglethorpe, colorless, almost bloodless looking; but he was not, as I'd had occasion to find out, brainless. He was, in fact, astute, cautious, methodical, and quite competent all around at handling Mitchkin's office affairs. Ordinarily he was talkative enough—sometimes irritatingly so. His silence now seemed to indicate that he was overwhelmed by the weight of some ponderous thoughts.

Well, I could wait, I decided. Meanwhile, I sat back in the sleigh, warm under the thick fur robes the servant had spread over us.

The mansion itself loomed visible shortly, at the top of the sloping road. It was like an old English castle, vast and solid in thick red stone with a broad, white-columned portico, where the sleigh finally pulled up to let Oglethorpe and me out. I glanced around as we entered the gleaming marble-floored hall. Large Viennese, crystal candlelabras shone brilliantly, and strange-looking marble-topped tables with ornate figurines and curiously designed clocks spoke silently of Cyrus Mitchkin's rather whimsical taste.

But where was Karla?

I knew I should not ask for her. Discretion was of the utmost importance. So I followed the servant who approached at a summons from Oglethorpe, and went

up the broad curving stairway, along the spacious, polished hall, to the third wing west. My suite consisted of a bedroom and marbled bath, with a living room from which French doors opened into a glass enclosed sun room. A fire danced in the ebony and Algerian agate fireplace, and before it, on a low table beside a deep armchair, was an elaborate silver tray holding bottles of scotch and rye and soda—and just one glass! Apparently, if I was to fix myself a highball, I would have to drink it alone.

Where was Karla?

I washed away the grime and fatigue of travel while the servant quietly and quickly unpacked my bags. Then I made a highball and sat before the fire, when a knock at the door sent my heart racing.

Karla!

But when I leaped to my feet and flung the door wide, only Oglethorpe stood there. Certainly he was an inoffensive little man, but at the moment I felt like kicking him downstairs, so disappointed was I at Karla's failure to put in an appearance.

"Mr. Benton would like to see us in the library," Oglethorpe announced, in a subdued halfwhisper.

Benton? Oh, yes. I'd heard him mentioned before. He was the Mitchkin family lawyer. Our footsteps echoed eerily in the vastness, and except for an occasional servant moving silently past, there seemed to be no one else about.

Benton looked like a lawyer. He was of medium height, a trifle portly, with a head of silvery hair. He came forward as we entered the library, shook my hand in acknowledgement of Oglethorpe's introduction, adding,

"I already know a great deal about you, Mr. Heflin."

He offered us cigars, and at a gesture from him, a butler materialized, seemingly out of thin air, to produce a tray of highballs.

With a certain flair for the dramatic, Benton began,

as soon as we sat down,

"Mr. Mitchkin is dying. The doctor says there is no chance for his recovery." He let this solemn but hardly unexpected announcement sink in, and then went on, gravely, "Some months ago, Mr. Mitchkin had me draw up his will. It leaves the bulk of his estate to his wife, as a trust until a stated time, and so on. I need not go into details with you, but I want you to understand the picture."

"Why?" I asked, bluntly.

"A sound question. Mr. Mitchkin has great faith in you, Mr. Heflin. He believes that you are an excellent businessman, and trustworthy as well. He does not place enough faith in any man's honesty as to make temptations easy, I might say; the conditions of his contracts check that. But he thinks that you could be trusted to manage his estate to the best advantage of Mrs. Mitchkin and any heirs, and for that reason he wanted to hear, from your own lips, that you would make that your responsibility."

He paused, and I realized he expected me to comment.

"It—it's quite a bit to ask. I imagine there is a lot more to his estate than the occasional purchasing and selling he does."

"A lot more," Benton conceded. "That is a most minor part of his interests. His holdings are large, and, I might say, in the hands of experienced—and bonded—men. Mr. Oglethorpe knows them all."

I looked at Oglethorpe, who nodded. Apparently he was more than just an office manager.

"Then surely these men know more about their individual activities than I could possibly know about all of them. What is it that I would do?"

"What Mr. Mitchkin did, limited, of course, by the fact that he was responsible to no one, while you would be expected to have records which could be checked at intervals by myself and two other executors."

It was an intriguing proposition. I did not doubt that I could handle it, and it would give me a chance to work with more money than I could ever have made myself. The idea of being responsible to Benton and his conferees did not bother me at all. Business could be exciting even run on that level.

But it wouldn't do to look over-eager.

"It hardly seems likely that I could run my own business at the same time," I pointed out.

"I quite agree." Benton smiled. "Mr. Mitchkin knows that you would be doing him a tremendous favor, and he does not mean to penalize you for it. If you should accept the position, you would be free to terminate it at the expiration of the current contract. The first contract would be for five years, as Mr. Mitchkin sees it, but successive contracts would be made somewhat shorter, if you preferred. By giving notice to us within the specified time, you could leave the position. On the other hand, the position is yours for life if you fill it successfully in our estimation, and I have no reason to expect otherwise. Only outright mismanagement or—hardly to be expected—mishandling of funds would be grounds for your dismissal."

I nodded, indicated satisfaction thus far, and encouraged him to continue explaining what would be required of me. Considerable travel would be involved, he was saying, but I would have a great deal of freedom since much of the responsibility was long since delegated to reliable men. . . I got him to give me the whole picture in detail, but meanwhile, I'd heard what I wanted to know.

Karla's hand was in this, I was sure; but the form in which Mitchkin had set up the contracts proved that he did not suspect the possibility of a lasting, or even permanent, relationship developing between Karla and me, for if he had, he would not have been so concerned with offering me options to drop the position at certain intervals.

Yes, the whole set-up looked perfect. After giving voice to what seemed a proper amount of hesitation, I expressed my gratitude at the high compliment Mr. Mitchkin had paid me, and finally allowed myself to be persuaded to make my decision without further delay, since Mr. Mitchkin particularly wanted my personal assurance about it—and his time was short.

"Thank you, Mr. Heflin," Benton said, shaking my hand with some fervor when I agreed to go to Mitchkin at once and tell him I had accepted the position. "This is terribly important to him."

As Oglethorpe, Benton and I made our way upstairs and along a thickly carpeted hall to Mitchkin's rooms, I felt my palms moist, my knees shaky. Karla's suite must be in this wing. . . Perhaps I would find her now in Mitchkin's room, at his bedside. The prospect of seeing her soon was far more exciting than the business proposition—of which the chief attraction, to me, was the idea that it would keep me close to Karla in years to come.

Benton stopped before a door at the end of the hall and tapped softly. He listened, apparently heard some signal not audible to us, and opened the door.

The bed was facing us, a large, old-fashioned bed, and in it, propped against satin pillows, was Cyrus Mitchkin. His skin was yellow, his form so skeletal as hardly to lift the bed covers. But his eyes were alert, and he held out his hand to us. A nurse moved swiftly to help him to a sitting position.

"Mr. Heflin," he said, his deep voice reduced now to a quavering whisper, "I never got to know you very personally. But you've done fine work for me. You're smart, and I've fixed it so you'll be honest too. No offense."

I smiled to show I was not angry.

"It will be worth your while," he went on. "Fifty thousand a year and a percentage of the profits which will permit you to build your annual income to several

times that figure if you work at it. . .” He tried to squeeze my hand with fingers as limp and cold as a damp glove as he added, weakly, “Karla—Mrs. Mitchkin—she thinks you’ll do for the job, and so do I. . . Take care of them. . .”

His voice faded away and his eyes closed. The nurse motioned us away, and a grim-looking, bulky man—the doctor—moved swiftly to his feeble patient’s side.

“He’s not—?” I began in hushed tone, as soon as we were outside.

Benton shook his head.

“The slightest exertion produces the total exhaustion you just saw. But he’ll rally. This time.”

The solemn portent of those last words needed no comment.

Back in the library, we were joined by another man, a thin man with red hair liberally sprinkled with grey. Benton introduced him as his law associate, one of the executors. We signed our contracts and had them witnessed then and there, a small, serious group consisting of the two lawyers, the butler, and a mousy man who had scurried in after us and was apparently a clerk and notary attached to Benton’s staff.

It was agreed that I must have time to close my own business, but I should remain at least overnight at Aspenmoor before returning. . . This, I was sure, would give me time to see Karla.

But Karla did not come to the table when dinner was served—an elaborate dinner, though far from festive, in view of the condition of the lord of the estate who lay helpless upstairs, and his lady who, it seemed, must be feeling too unnerved from the strain to join her guests. Since only Oglethorpe, the lawyers and I were present, the conversation was quiet, centering mostly on business.

Later, perhaps, I thought anxiously.

Surely Karla would want to talk with me, at least briefly—about the contract just signed and what this

would mean to both of us; about Paula, whom she had sent to see me, and about whom she would certainly want the news; about a great deal else which mattered only to the two of us. Her concern for her dying husband, and for appearances, need not prevent a brief conversation later in the evening.

But she still did not appear when I sat with the other men in the library after dinner. Thinking she might be waiting to find me alone, I excused myself as early as I decently could, and went to my own rooms upstairs.

The hours passed as I sat before my fireplace, toying with a drink. The only discreet thing for me to do, I thought, with increasing nervousness, was to wait until she was free to come to me unobserved. But perhaps a message from me—I could send it through a servant, if I hurried, before the hour grew indecently late.

I was aware as I rang the old-fashioned tapestry bell-pull that I was being reckless, possibly ruining everything. But if I was to leave in the morning, this would be my only chance.

By the time a servant appeared in response to my summons, I had a brief, carefully worded note ready for him to take to her, stating simply that I should like to express to her personally my appreciation for the opportunity she and her husband had offered me.

I was shaking with nerves by the time the servant returned.

"Mrs. Mitchkin regrets," he said, "that she cannot see you at this time."

"Is that all?" I asked, stupified.

"That was all, sir," he said, and waited.

I shook my head, baffled. "Thank you," I said, dismissing him—and feeling like I had been dismissed myself.

She could not—or would not—see me.

All that night, lying sleepless, feeling her nearness

somewhere in the vast castle, I wondered why. It could not be simply that she thought it would be indiscreet to see me. There had to be more to it than that. Had she at last become offended by my rude and entirely unjustified treatment of her in the past? If so, why had she permitted her husband to give me the position?

I was a nervous wreck by the time I caught my train next day—and still completely mystified.

Since, in view of her response to my message, I dared not even inquire about her, I was left to figure things out for myself. And nothing I figured made sense.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I felt no real remorse when, back at my office, Jones handed me a folded newspaper which displayed Willard Chase's picture. Somehow I tried to feel badly that Chase's car had gone out of control, killing him in the crackup. But for the thought of Midge Hunt I might well have, despite the fact that his crossing my trail of life had caused me untold misery concerning Karla.

From reading the newspaper article, I happily noticed that Beth Browning had escaped death while riding with Chase. I seemed to share the gladness that I knew very well Mr. and Mrs. Browning surely were feeling; that they would get their daughter back, injured, but otherwise safe from death and what might have been worse, Chase. Without comment I placed the paper on Jones' desk and went thoughtfully to my own desk.

With my arms folded upon my desk, I lay my head against them, sadly reminiscing New Orleans and the terrible mistake I'd made in Miami. The many months had no doubt taken their toll, and I felt worn and spent, to the point nothing seemed to matter. I'd signed the contract to run the Mitchkin estate, and Karla had allowed this, but had refused to see me after it was done.

I had no alternative but to ask to be excused, insist that the contract be voided. There were already enough capable men in Mitchkin's employment to handle the business. I knew I couldn't bear to be in the position, recalling constantly that Karla existed, but that she had finished with me because of the foolish accusations I'd made.

Jones buzzed the intercom and I answered weakly. "A lady to see you, Mr. Heflin."

I ran my hand over my hair and told her to show the lady in. When I looked, there was a strong urge within me to believe that it was Karla who entered. It was Paula. Still, by the way she walked, and the expression on her face, it could have been Karla.

"Hello, Jack," she said, her voice containing a new ring.

I rose and said,

"Sit down, Paula. I'm glad you could come up."

She sat, and I hurriedly offered her a cigarette, which she took. I lit the cigarette for her, did likewise for myself, then resumed my seat at my desk.

"I couldn't help noticing the paper on your secretary's desk," she said. "So I guess you know what happened."

"Yes, Paula," I said, striving to regret, "I know. I saw it only a few minutes ago. . .I'd just returned from Canada."

"I know," she told me. "I talked to Karla this morning, early. She told me you had been there, and she mentioned that things between you had changed little. Cyrus Mitchkin died this morning at dawn."

I stiffened in my chair, looked into Paula's eyes, then relaxed. A fine old gentleman had passed on! Over and over I kept telling myself this, all the while Paula and I exchanged glances, our thoughts no doubt racing together.

"Karla has everything now, Jack," she volunteered.

"Yeah," I said, half-heartedly. "Everything, I

guess."

"You and I sort of got caught on the end of nothing," she said, "It almost floored me when she told me that she had refused to see you last night, and that she'd decided never to have anything more to do with you."

"So she told you that?"

"Yes, she told me. I'm sorry, Jack."

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't know. I guess it's because I thought more of you than I realized."

I stiffened again and said,

"Paula. This is Jack Heflin you're talking to."

"I know. But it's true. I admit I feel bad about Willard, and if I could've found him, and he'd had me, I'd have gone with him. But it wasn't meant to be—from the beginning."

I didn't look at her now. Toying with something on my desk, I thought profoundly, wondering if I could imagine that Paula was Karla, and if I could get on with her as if she were Karla.

"Could you leave the office today?" she asked

"I suppose so," I said. "Why?"

"I thought perhaps we could go to your place, have some drinks, and try to forget. I need you, Jack, and I think you need me."

"Meet me in the coffee shop down stairs," I said.

"I have to dictate a letter before I leave. No, I'll have Jones send a wire. Meet me down there —I'll be down in five minutes!"

She smiled pleasantly and left. When she was gone, that smile played dangerously with me, and I began to actually decide to try if I could to replace Karla with her. Astrologically they should be alike, I decided, both the same birthdate, twins, only their aims had differed through the past.

I hurriedly scribbled a message for Jones to wire to Canada. It was brief, to the point, stating that I desired to renege from the contract, that my business here

would not permit me to go through with the negotiated plans. This was handed to Jones, who frowned, with instructions to send immediately. I donned my coat and went hastily to meet Paula.

The apartment was more radiant that forenoon. Paula had selected the music while I'd mixed the drinks and, though my luck was bad at pretending, the morning was far more delightful than weeping in my office would have been. We sat a ways apart on the lounge, and Paula watched me closely, as if she were trying to decide something for herself. Finally she said,

"Do you think you might be happy with me after all, Jack?"

"I don't know."

"You must realize that Karla and I are quite a lot alike. And all the *money* in the world wouldn't make you happy."

"Meaning," I said, "that the only difference now is the money Karla has?"

"After my many bitter experiences and disappointments, I'd say Karla and I are more alike now than ever."

"Perhaps," and I swallowed a terrific mouthful of rye.

"Of course," she reminded, "I haven't had the sexual experience she's had. But if you'd tell me how she was, I'd try terribly hard to emulate her."

"I'll tell you," I said, turning now to face her. "She set me on fire! She made me feel like a lavish sultan with ten thousand harem girls, all working on me at the same time."

"I'll try, Jack," she said, emphatically. "Give me a few days. Don't let's leave here, let me have the time she told me she had with you in New Orleans. You were the cause of her wanting to leave Madame Fronzeh's—the real reason she married Cyrus Mitch. kin. You made her want another life, Jack. Make me want a life like that, Jack!"

I could see that she wanted to come to me. She leaned invitingly toward me. I put down my glass and reached for her, then brought her closely enough that our lips touched first. It was true. Paula tasted like Karla. She smelled of Karla. Her flesh felt the same, and when her breasts crushed passionately against me they had the feel of Karla's divine breasts when she had dropped one near my lips.

The wrath of wanting Karla for more than a year struck out now. The New Orleans scene was impatiently wanting to become alive again. There was no time to think about disrobing. I chewed hungrily on her lips, stroked her hair, all the while drawing her savagely against me. Paula suddenly was Beth Browning; the way she lowered herself, taking my off-balanced torso with her, until her back touched the lounge. The lower half of her garment began pulling between our tightly-clenched bodies, and I nearly came to my senses because of likeness to the incident in the Browninghouse.

I was unable to lie with Paula when it was over. Something dug harshly at me, and I almost felt guilty for the first time in my life. It was a grim reflection but I wondered, as I stood to arrange myself, how Karla might feel had she seen what had so recently taken place between her sister and me.

"I know what you're thinking, Jack," Paula said. "But we'll be cooler next time, and we can seek more comfort. Don't give me up yet!"

"I won't, Paula," I promised loyally. "Right now I'm a little angry with myself."

"Let's drink some more," she suggested. "Why don't you call your office and tell that girl that you won't be back for a few days."

This I pondered selfishly. It was escape. Liquor, the transparent cloak, behind which one could hide but never fully be out of sight. A false escape, the kind that left you more enslaved when the effects wore off. Paula thought she knew what I had been thinking. Well,

maybe. But I doubted it. Dolefully I went to the phone and called Jones. It was like Paula had asked. Jones shouldn't expect me back to the office for several days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It was the third day and I had recently slipped on trousers and shirt to allow the delivery boy to enter the apartment to bring in groceries. He had put the box on the kitchen table and tiptoed out of the apartment. A thought to return to snap the door lock never entered my mind, and I again undressed and went to where Paula lay naked upon the bed.

"I love you so much now, Jack," she reminded me, as I lay beside her.

I meditated shortly without replying. I knew that Paula had me pussy-whipped. I was afraid to leave the apartment or let her leave, though she made no such suggestion that she go. Her body now seemed an essential part of mine, like it took both our bodies for me to continue to survive.

"Do you feel that way about me yet, Jack? Have I made any kind of an impression on you?"

"You're a bitch, Paula!" I blurted. "You're a cunning witch!"

She tossed a leg over me, her ankle rocking over my midsection, and she began smothering me affectionately, laughing like I'd paid her a compliment. I was shriveled and sexually exhausted, but I still wanted her again; the kind of want that makes a man hug a woman tightly and nibble at her body everywhere.

We were startled by a loud pounding on the apartment door.

"Who?" Paula asked.

"I have no idea," I said, at first undisturbed. But when the heavy knocking continued, more emphatically as seconds passed, Paula said,

"Your secretary wouldn't. . ."

"No she wouldn't," I said, lying very still, holding Paula's breast tightly in my palm.

The knocking let up for only fifteen seconds or so, then resumed with a more urgent, persistent sound.

"I'll dress and answer it," I said.

"No, Jack!" Paula objected. "Please don't. It might be something to take you away from me. Don't answer it!"

I obeyed pliantly and listened as the knocking continued. There were moments during which I became angry because somebody could be that persistent. I wanted to go to the door, open it, and clobber whoever so rudely continued to knock. Then there was a relief. We listened and, for nearly two minutes, the pounding had ceased. Another minute. Still another. Suddenly both Paula and I relaxed and locked ourselves again into each other's arms.

There was an involuntary sound, like somebody drawing in a light scream. I broke from Paula and looked up into Karla's horrified face. Her hand had gone to her cheek, and it was evident that she was exerting pressure in order to refrain from screaming aloud. Paula half rose and stared at her sister. Suddenly Karla turned around and, seeing that it appeared that she would leave, I called,

"Don't leave, Karla!"

"I'm not leaving, Jack," she said, her back to us. "I'll wait outside the room until you get dressed. I'm sorry I barged in on you,—somehow, I thought maybe you were sick."

When Paula and I looked at one another her features were drawn into a disappointed contortion. I had expected her to jump up to get dressed, but she lay, staring thoughtfully at me, like it was really the first time she had ever seen me. I then rose and, since my other trousers had been left elsewhere, I went to the closet and quickly selected the first pair which my

fingers touched.

I started to leave the room but I stopped. I glanced down at Paula, and I'd sworn she was in a daze, the way she still lay, naked and unmoved, just staring crazy-like at me. Without further hesitation I left the room, closing the door behind me.

Karla was seated in my special casual chair when I entered. I stood before her but she didn't look up at me. Her purse was beside her, half off her lap, and she pulled nervously at a hanky, drawing it through her fingers.

"Karla, I'm sorry that you had to see."

"Don't apologize, Jack. Please don't, it'll only make it worse. Cyrus was just buried, and I have no right to feel one way or another about it. I must confess that I've been worried sick about you, and I had to come to see what was the matter."

For the first time I noticed that her raiment was black, and the veil she wore was thrown back over the front of her hat.

"I don't really know whatever went wrong between us, Jack," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, hardly audible. "I guess during the past year I've been an unfaithful wife, trying to see that we kept in touch."

"Karla, please!" I beseeched. "It never was your fault that I made an ass of myself!"

She laughed and said,

"I guess it's just that way when one has a twin sister."

"Why wouldn't you see me when I was there,—tell me how you felt?" I asked. "I sent you a message, wanting desperately to see you!"

Her eyes were more alive now and she stared momentarily at me, like she was unfamiliar with the topic of my conversation. It appeared that she was going to speak until she looked away from me, her expression changing. I turned, and there was Paula, clad in one of my robes.

"I don't think my sister will tell you the truth," she said. "Give me a cigarette, Jack, please."

I reached for a cigarette case on the coffee table and took out one for her. When I lit it for her, she sought in my eyes loyalty and preference for her rather than her sister.

"Thank you, Jack," she said, and walked casually to a chair and sat, facing her sister. "For the first time in my life I'm going to be honest," she continued, crossing her legs, exposing them when the robe fell apart.

"There's no need for any explaining," Karla said.

"Yes there is," Paula contradicted. "I owe it to Jack. So far as you're concerned, you're sitting pretty. You have the world, and all I have is Jack, if he'll let me have him."

"I'm a widow in mourning," Karla said. "You're more entitled to him than I am."

"Let me have some choice here, ladies!" I bellowed loudly, like something which was being tossed back and forth across the room.

"You can make your choice after I explain things," Paula said. "I know my sister, and she won't fight me for you. She won't tell you that I double-crossed her."

"I was the one who received your message when you were at the Mitchkin manor," Paula admitted. "I was the one who refused to see you. Karla had asked me to go to you and tell you that she was afraid to see you, in view of the fact she was afraid she'd break down and cause a scene while her husband was dying. But I didn't go, Jack. As you know, I didn't go. And I'm not sorry. At first, I wanted to do to you what you did to me. I wanted to break up you and Karla, for good, like what you caused between Willard and me."

Karla was crying now. I had the violent urge to belt Paula, to strike her hard enough to land her against the floor, face first.

"I intended holding you here for as long as it took

to break you up," Paula commenced again to say. "But I got fooled. I got caught in my own trap! I've fallen madly in love with Jack!"

"And you told me that Karla didn't want to see me any more," I heard myself say.

"That's right. Fortunately I went to Karla's house actually believing that Willard was hanging out there—it was the seed you planted in my mind, Jack. Once I was there, Karla gave me a chance to strike back. You can beat me half to death now. Do whatever you want to me, but I'll still love you!"

"I must go now," Karla said, rising hastily. "I'm glad you're all right, Jack—terribly glad you weren't sick. I'll see that the contract is canceled."

"Karla!" I moved quickly to her and held her, restraining her from leaving. "You mustn't go!"

"I'm sorry, Jack. I must go."

"I can't bear to have you go like this, Karla!" I implored. "It's been a living hell to keep away from you all these months!"

For an instant I thought I would cry. I was holding both of Karla's arms, just below her shoulders, and I'd have given anything in the world had my relations with Paula never existed. She met my gaze and, when our eyes had locked, I saw those uncontrolled tears roll down her cheeks. I drew her to me, determined to never let her go!

"I won't give up, Jack!" Paula nearly screamed. I released Karla and turned to Paula.

"I can't blame myself for what happened, Paula, no matter how much I might want to. I admit I tried to find Karla again—in you—and I admit also that I nearly did, at least I think I nearly did. I could probably say that I would like to have both of you; that I'm very attached to both of you, like the two of you are really one. But as the three of us stand here, and I have to make a choice, I must, despite all my blunders, choose Karla."

"Wait a minute, Jack," Paula said. "If you go to bed, in a dark room, and either Karla or I came in and got into bed with you, would you know one from the other?"

I thought lengthily then said,

"I don't know."

"Except from a haunting memory of a few nights in New Orleans, how do you really know now which one of us you love?"

I hesitated a reply.

"Look at us, Jack. Look at Karla, then look at me. Remember both of us. Remember New Orleans, then remember these past three days you've explored every inch of me."

Paula had a point, only I didn't know what it was. The past three days she *had* been like Karla. I felt it was true that I might not know one from the other in a dark room. But I wanted Karla. Maybe the whole episode in New Orleans influenced my decision, who knew?

When I turned to Karla for help she said,

"I'm afraid Paula really loves you, Jack."

"But don't you love me, Karla?" I asked.

"Yes, Jack," she said. "I love you—and I love Paula, too. I'm in a terribly awkward position."

"All right. All right!" Paula said, leaving her seat. "You take him, Karla! You found him. He loves you. So take him! Let me get my clothes on, and you can take my place!"

The relief I enjoyed was short-lived. Karla said,

"If Jack takes the estate over, he'll be traveling quite a lot. I would like to have you live with us, Paula, and since you and Jack have already been together, I don't see that it would hurt if he made a mistake half the time and found enjoyment with you."

"That's very subtle euphemism, Karla," Paula remarked. "But I love you for it, if that's the way you really feel."

"If I didn't feel that way," she said, "I'd be in a

terrible state of insanity now—after what I saw when I came in awhile ago.”

“I don’t think this would work,” I objected weakly.

It was very amiable the way both girls came to me, each placing an arm around me. With my right arm I circled Karla’s waist, and with my left I circled Paula’s waist. I had been three days with Paula, and I could feel a funny sensation leaning to my right side where Karla stood. In my mind it was definitely ascertained that the first mistake would happen with Karla. And I was further convinced that most of the mistakes would be with her, until the day Paula grew tired of the mistakes and left.

SABER BOOK



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